Everyone knows Dementors can take souls, but nothing says that they have to keep them. After the Dementor attack in Little Whinging ends disastrously, Harry must find a place for himself in a new world, fighting a different sort of war against the nascent Voldemort.
A few introductory notes:
1. The relationship in this story is very eventual, and is not my main focus. If you are looking for something that is mostly romance, this story will disappoint.
2. I refrained from tagging characters other than those who are the most central to the story. Other characters that appear regularly at various important points include, but are not limited to: Argus Filch, Poppy Pomfrey, Lily Evans/Potter, James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Mad-Eye Moody, and most of the major named Death Eaters and Order Members from the first war.
3. I also should note that this story includes a few moments of prostitution; Harry is not the prostitute. I didn't tag this because I felt doing so would imply that it is a very different sort of story than it is.
4. There is a small amount of narrated intimacy, but I'm not good at smut. What little there is appears for the purposes of character development. I have tagged Underage Sex. Please note that these moments take place during the summer when Harry turns seventeen and after. If you're not interested in reading these bits, an edited version (= no narrated sex or nudity) is available on fanfiction.net. Same title, author Eider Down.
5. I now try to update this fic every two weeks on the weekend.
6. Starting in Chapter 24, this fic is beta-read by the wonderful AverageFish of ffn. Check out their awesome ongoing stories (one is a time-travelling MOD Harry paired with Snape, the other features a time-traveling-ish Snape who wakes up as an infant Harry Potter. Their author ID on ffn is 8207725.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
hadn't worked properly; tripping over his own feet, Harry retreated further as the Dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain—concentrate—

A pair of grey, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the Dementor's robes, reaching for him. A rushing noise filled Harry's ears.

"Expecto patronum!"

His voice sounded dim and distant. Another wisp of silver smoke, feebler than the last, drifted from the wand—he couldn't do it any more, he couldn't work the spell.

He tried, he did, but that familiar warm glow whispered away into the frigid air and guttered out with a faint sigh. Scraps of past happiness and imagined moments of joy alike escaped him. As he drifted into nothingness, his mind idly noticed that the Dementor's iron grasp, which had speared an ice burn into his neck, had loosened. It knew the fight in Harry had died.

Harry didn't notice when the Dementor lowered its hood and grasped his cheek with its other hand. He didn't notice as it opened its mouth and pressed it against his own frozen lips. The Dementor drew in a deep rattling breath, and an old thought from what seemed a lifetime ago echoed through Harry's hollowed mind, this isn't so bad, his twelve year old self reminded him.

Harry teetered on the edge of non-existence, beyond any horror or regret. At most he was dispassionately aware of the curiosity that was being but almost not being. He faintly registered a wrenching tug—was that his soul being taken? The terror he would expect at such a thought was absent.

Suddenly a voice sounded in the nothing. Though no louder than falling snow, it cut across the emptiness, so shocking in the endless silence that the words seemed to tattoo themselves in the not-air.

A soul for a soul, little wizard.

Whatever Harry was (do I have a body?) swayed.

A crackle of emotion infused the void. Is that regret?, the boy wondered.

The voice seemed to sigh. We are monsters no more than what we are made to be, little wizard. The price is fixed. A soul for a soul.

Harry nodded dumbly. That seemed fair enough.

Without warning the nothing exploded with the roar of long-held breath finally being exhaled. His body felt battered by frost and fire, and a white-steaming mist that resurrected his will. Water, air, earth, which had all faded into the void, shattered themselves into being. Aware again of his bruised flesh and aching bones, Harry spiraled into the darkness of unconsciousness with only a faint thought.

I can see the stars.

xoxoxox

He first noticed how uncomfortably hot and sticky he was. As Harry opened his eyes, the blazing summer sun seemed to awaken his body, which loudly complained of a small army of aches and pains.
Shite, I spent the whole night outside. The Dursleys are going to kill me for missing their breakfast.

Getting to his feet was no fun, but there was nothing for it. It was amazing that none of the meddling neighbors had kicked him awake yet. Eyes squinting against the glaring midday sun, he turned to make his way back to Number Four.

What the hell?

He was on Privet Drive, he was sure of it, but all the houses after Number Two were just, well, not there. In fact, Number Two was missing a roof, and the absent brick on the sides revealed the loud logo printed on the drywall. Wisteria Walk was there, but it too was missing some houses, and all the trees in the neighborhood looked scraggly and too short. Number Four and its surroundings were nothing but field covered in burnt grasses, a far cry from their typical pristine green.

Wait. I got kissed by a Dementor. Kissed! What did it do to me?

"Oi! You, runt! What the 'ell are doing here?!!"

Harry jumped at the booming voice. He looked up to see a group of men at Number Two glaring in his direction. The large, deeply-tanned man at their fore yelled again. "Dammit, boy, this is a closed site! We don' want no hooligans here!"

"What? You mean, are you building houses here?" This makes no sense.

"Well what the ruddy 'ell does it look like? 'A course we're building houses! This 'ere's set to be a 'uge new neighborhood in the next few years. Now why are you 'ere?"

Ignoring the stutter of his heart, Harry bit out, "Oh, I, er, I got lost. I'll just—go, I guess."

The man grunted and turned back to his companions as Harry numbly made his way to a main road. The whirling of his mind was threatening to make him sick up.

More buildings and houses were missing, but he recognized the skeleton of the Little Whinging he knew. As he passed the local pharmacy, he bent down to pick up a discarded *Daily Mirror*.

"Record-Breaking Summer Scorcher Continues! Will It Ever End?", the headline screamed at him. *It's been hot, but 'record-breaking' is a stretch*, he snorted. Harry was no stranger to journalistic hyperbole. He made to throw the paper down, but his eyes snagged on the date.

Monday, 3 August 1976.

He burbled out a delirious giggle. 1976. 1976. A moment later and Harry was bent over howling with laughter, tears streaming down his face. 1976. A woman walking past him glared and ushered her children to the other side of the lane. The alarmed pharmacist yanked open his door and shooed Harry, still doubling over, from his storefront. 1976. Harry made his way to the alley behind the shops and flopped down on the cracked bricks and mud, gasping for breath and fighting to calm himself.


*So I was kissed by a Dementor and then I time travelled.*

...  

*This summer sucks.*
Do all people kissed by Dementors end up in 1976? Is this some sort of Dementor victim hub?

I was kissed by a Dementor. How, how am I even alive?

Harry would never clearly remember how long he spent in that sun-burnt alley pondering if he had gone insane, if he was in some kiss-inspired dream, if he were in Hell, if his soul was lost in an illusion as his body lay on Privet Drive, an empty husk. Eventually, and with great difficulty, he wrangled his mind into the semblance of rationality and arrived at a handful of working theories.

If I'm insane, nothing I do matters, so I might as well do something.

If I'm dreaming, I'll either wake up or I won't, so I might as well do something until then.

I'm probably not dead and in Hell, since 1) I don't think I deserve that, and 2) This would be a pretty tame Hell. My hell would have more cupboards, Snape, Dursleys, and Voldemort.

Even if I've been kissed and this is an illusion, I might as well do something before my body dies.

So.

Time travel.

Holy buggering shite, time travel.

The fragile rationality he had cobbled together to get to this point promptly degenerated. At some point Harry realized he'd been sitting on his arse, hands over his eyes, shaking his head frantically for quite some time. This did nothing to bolster his opinion of his own sanity. He needed—he needed—he needed—

I need a grownup.

He brought himself up short. Adults—at least useful ones—were, alas, in short supply. 1976! My mum and dad are alive! They can help! They—

His heart sank. They're kids now. Harry shoved the burgeoning hope that he could meet his parents—save his parents?—away. He would think about all that later. He certainly had enough to deal with as it was.

The problem was the same with Sirius and Professor Lupin.

Professor McGonagall sprang to mind, but while she was a good and decent woman, she'd never believed him much when she knew who he was. He couldn't envision her believing him now. Besides, the best she'd do is toddle him off to—

Dumbledore. Yes, of course, Dumbledore!

At once Harry wanted to rush off and divulge the whole ordeal to his headmaster. To lay his past, the Dementors, the kiss, the time travel in Dumbledore's lap and sit back with a biscuit to munch as the great wizard soothed his worries and made arrangements. The Headmaster would smile at him, his bright eyes twinkling merrily behind his spectacles, as Harry described his escapade, just he had
done before.

*But Dumbledore doesn't know me here. Who's to say he would even believe me?*

Harry's stomach suddenly became a churning pit.

*Awful things happen to wizards who meddle with time, Harry,* Hermione's voice echoed.

Panic thrummed under his skin. After they rescued Sirius in third year, Hermione had told him all about time travel in the wizarding world (though he only listened with half an ear as he played Exploding Snap with Ron). Travel with time turners was highly regulated and misuse was punishable by time in Azkaban. Her eyes had grown soft and bored into his own when she explained that time turners couldn't go back more than twenty-four hours, and though wizards at the Ministry allegedly experimented with attempting to cultivate other forms of time travel, it was thus far impossible.

*I know what you're thinking Harry,* she had said, *but there's just no way you could go back and save your parents. I'm sorry, but even if you could, the effects could be disastrous and you could end up in a cell for the rest of your life, or erase yourself as yourself from existence or—* At that point the cards had blown up, and Harry cursed himself for being more interested in a game than Hermione's typically long-winded, but now terribly pertinent, lecture.

Dumbledore was probably already the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. If Harry went to him, who was to say that the Headmaster wouldn't decide—or even be obliged—to turn him in to the Ministry even if he *did* believe him? Harry had traveled nineteen *years,* something both apparently impossible and probably really illegal. This Dumbledore didn't care about Harry like his Dumbledore did. Would he be put in Azkaban? End up imprisoned by Ministry researchers? What this meant he had no idea, but he'd heard the Dursleys watching *Dr. Who* and alien movies through the slats in his cupboard often enough to know that this probably would entail never seeing the light of day again. While he didn't have Hermione's intimate knowledge of the intricacies of, well, anything, Harry felt that the Ministry learning he was from the future would qualify as *a very bad thing.*

Dumbledore was too great a gamble. At least for now.

*I seriously need a mom or a dad for this.*

A ray of hope shot through him. He did know one other set of grownups who might be able to help him, at least a little. True, Molly Weasley would probably fuss and be more of an impediment, though she might be able to take care of his grumbling stomach. Mr. Weasley, on the other hand, had been the only adult to trust him enough to tell him anything of Sirius when he had first escaped two years ago. Besides, Bill probably wasn't even old enough to be at Hogwarts yet. Maybe they wouldn't know Dumbledore well enough to send Harry to him.

Harry knew no one else, had no place to stay, and only a few Muggle pounds and wizarding coins in his pocket. Beyond that, he had but the clothes on his back and his wand.

*I have to do something.*

*And the Weasleys probably aren't the stupidest something I can do.*

Drawing in a deep breath, he rounded the corner back onto the main street. With his shoulders squared and his body tensed for the unknown, he stuck out his wand. Hopefully the Knight Bus was around in 1976.

xoxoxox
Harry's knees were shaking as he took his first tentative steps down the lane where the Knight Bus had deposited him. His hands were shoved into his pockets, one gripping his wand, the other his new violently-purple toothbrush. The Knight Bus conductor, a younger Ernie Prang, had gaped and nearly fallen over when Harry paid the few extra coins for the latter. Harry wondered if anyone had ever actually purchased the Knight Bus toothbrush before. Honestly, what kind of person would buy a toothbrush from public transportation?

*Well, a time traveler would.*

He'd had the bus drop him off a bit more than mile away from the Burrow, and now found himself charging ahead into an encounter with his future best friend's parents.

*It's okay,* he repeated to himself. *They're good people. I have my wand.*

*And a toothbrush. Nothing can stop me now!*

He walked down the lane slowly, carefully constructing a lie that might seem believable. It wasn't as if he could barge into the Burrow claiming to be a time-traveling family friend right from the off.

All too soon the Weasley's house came into view. It looked much as he remembered it, though the top two floors hadn't yet been added on and the front garden was dotted with a mess of children’s toys. The golden light of candles in the windows made the Burrow seem like a fairy-tale cottage glowing against the backdrop of the slowly setting sun.

The tableau was broken by an angry growl sounding behind him. Harry didn't even have time to think to draw his wand before he was set upon by…a very small dog. The snarling terrier lunged for his ankles, causing Harry to lose his footing in surprise and tumble to the ground. With what could only be the canine equivalent of a smirk, the little dog planted himself on Harry's chest in triumph.

"Ronald! Ronald! Stop it! Oh, you bad boy, get off that young man!" the unmistakable voice of Molly Weasley scolded.

"Aw right! Go Ron! You got him!" came the delighted cry of a child. "Who's a good doggy, boy?"

The terrier preened.

Harry gawped. His mind was getting rather tired of all the boggling he'd subjected it to today. *Ron was named after the family dog? Oh, I bet he really hates that.* It was no wonder Harry had never known. Ron probably owed Fred and George a hefty debt for keeping that little fact quiet.

There was an exasperated sigh. "Oh, goodness, Ronald, yes, congratulations on capturing the intruder dear, but please let the poor boy up now."

With a cheerful yip, Ron the terrier trotted off towards the house. Harry tried not to stare as he dusted himself off and faced a much younger and very pregnant Mrs. Weasley, who smiled at him even as she held him at wand-point. Beside her stood a young boy, maybe five or six—Bill? Charlie, maybe? — who was also pointing a stick at Harry. The child assumed what he must have considered a forbidding look, though its effect was undermined by the small branches of leaves still sticking out from his 'wand.' Ron the terrier pawed at them.

"Hello there, dear. Forgive little Ron. He's always been a very faithful protector of his family. Poor boy's nearly in his twenties now but still gives it his all, has been since my Arthur was a schoolboy," she confided before straightening her arm and looking at him more sharply. "Now, please excuse my frankness, but these are troubled times we live in, aren't they." It wasn't a question. "Who are you and why did you come to my home?"
One deep breath later and Harry was plunging into the story he had concocted. "I'm really sorry to disturb you, ma'am. I was at home doing chores outside and my big brother pranked me. He just learned to Apparate and passed his test, you see. Anyway, he grabbed me and Apparated me to some field, and then he just left me there! I found my way to that lane, and came here because it didn't look like a Muggle house." He sheepishly lowered his eyes. "Again, I'm really sorry, but I don't even know where I am…"

Molly clucked sympathetically. "Oh, that sounds like something my Arthur and his brothers would have done. Though teenagers doing side-along!" She tsked and lowered her wand. "Well, why don't you come in dear, and we'll get you sorted out."

She ushered him inside, the boy and dog right at her heels.

Harry couldn't help but jump when Molly lumbered behind him and unceremoniously began dusting the dirt and grime off his back and—he gulped a bit—his backside. "Goodness, child, you look a fright! How long ago did your brother maroon you?"

"Er—I dunno what time it is now." He glanced at the side wall and was surprised by the absence of the Weasley family clock. "But it was before lunchtime. I've been wandering around for awhile now."

"Dear Merlin! That was hours ago! No surprise you're looking so peaky. Hold on for a moment and I'll set you up with a nice dinner."

Harry grinned. He really was hungry. The Dursleys, as per usual, had fed him only enough to keep Ron the dog healthy that summer. He felt a twinge of guilt that he created his lie with an eye to manipulating Mrs. Weasley into offering dinner, but couldn't regret the end result as he watched her spoon a generous portion of beef stew into a large bowl.

"Now," Mrs. Weasley said, as she placed the heaping bowl in front of him, "what's your Floo address? I'll call your mother straight away and let her know you're all right."

Alarm bells rang in Harry's head. He had apparently not thought his cunning plan all the way through. Shite! Think of something! Rallying, he smiled at her. "Oh, my mum and dad aren't home today, ma'am. Otherwise my brother would never have dared such a stunt."

Shaking her head, Mrs. Weasley readied a smaller bowl for the Weasley boy, who had plonked himself next to Harry and was peering at him in undisguised interest. Ron had overcome his initial aversion and had plastered himself to Harry's other leg, large brown eyes gazing at him hopefully. "Ronald, off with you, don't bother the boy for scraps!"

Ron responded by inching impossibly closer.

Molly sighed in defeat. "Dear, what did you say your name was?"


"I, uh, didn't ma'am. Sorry about that. I'm—" He was saved from floundering for a name by the entrance of a twenty-something Mr. Weasley, who at this age looked quite like the twins.

"Evening Weasleys!"

The boy chirped a hello and Molly kissed Arthur's cheek. Mr. Weasley turned and looked at Harry with a cocked eyebrow. "Well now, when I left this morning Charlie was quite a bit shorter and had rather redder hair!"
Mrs. Weasley smiled. "Oh, Arthur, our guest got a bit lost earlier today." The smile faltered into a concerned frown. "Wait…Actually, where is Charlie? I haven't seen him…"

"Probably still setting fires in Dad's shed," the boy—who had to be Bill—offered casually.

Arthur was off in a flash. Molly quickly wiped her hands on the apron that covered her heavy belly. “Thank goodness you’re going to be the last one,” she muttered quietly. “I can't handle two, how in the world am I going to manage three?"

Harry bit back a smile. Poor Molly had no idea.

The kitchen was suddenly silent but for Ron the dog's whimpering attempts to inspire Harry’s charity.

"Why would your brother be lighting fires?"

Little Bill grinned. "I told him that baby dragons would only come an’ live with us if the shed was super hot." The boy pulled a rankled face. "Didn't 'spect him to actually be able to light fires. I'm almost six and don't know how. An' he's only three!"

Oh poor Mrs. Weasley.

"Were they very big fires?"

"Nah, they were little ones, I think." Bill looked rather mollified by this.

They continued eating in a companionable silence. As he looked around the familiar yet unfamiliar Burrow, Harry felt an oppressive weight settle over him.

The Weasleys were good people, a young family with their own lives and their own problems. How could he just drop the mess that was his life into their laps? Percy hasn't even been born yet! With a start he realized that more was at stake than just him disrupting the domestic bliss of the Burrow. Much more. Just by his very presence, he could change the future. He knew that the Weasleys all survived the first war, healthy, happy, and intact.

Then a truly chilling thought occurred to him.

What if I do something that leads to Ron or the twins or Ginny not even being born? I could destroy their entire existence completely by accident!

There was nothing for it. He simply couldn't interact with the Weasleys any more than he already had.

I have to leave. Leave now and not come back.

The Weasleys had been good friends to him, and now the kindest thing he could do in return was to not be their friend, to be nothing but a passing visitor, soon to be forgotten in the chaos of a newborn Percy.

Yes, Molly and Arthur could be the adults Harry needed, but they deserved better than for him to ask them to be.

Bill, he noticed, was regarding him with the wide-eyed seriousness only possessed by small children, as if he had cottoned on to Harry's growing discomfort.

Ron whinged again. Harry smiled sadly and began smuggling bits of beef under the table for him.
The little boy giggled.

The Weasley parents soon returned with a chubby little three-year-old Charlie. The boy looked most put out, whether it was because he was in trouble or because no dragon hatchlings had arrived, Harry couldn't be sure.

"Sorry for the interruption dear, would you like some fruit for pudding?" Mrs. Weasley called as she bustled about readying bowls for Charlie and her husband.

_Leave now._

"Thank you so much for everything, ma'am, but it's starting to get pretty dark. I really should be going home." He paused. "Er—I hate to impose, but do you mind if I use your Floo?"

Mr. Weasley smiled absently as he began savoring his stew. "Not at all, son. Are you going straight home?"

_Shite. Where am I going to go? Diagon Alley? How will I explain going there? I can't say I live nearby, since I told them I'd been working in our garden..._

_Hogsmeade._

_I'll figure out the next step once I'm there._

"I, well no. I promised my dad I'd pick something up for him in Hogsmeade—we live nearby—and I don't want to disappoint him. Do you mind if I just Floo to the Three Broomsticks?" _Please buy this, please buy this._

"Of course, dear," Molly assured him. She eyed his clothing critically. "Although I can't let you out in public looking like that, I'd never be able to face your mother! Why there's even rips in the seat of your pants!" Harry turned a bit red at this unexpected revelation and tried to discreetly clasp his hands behind his back. Molly, heedless of his embarrassment, continued. "Well, I'll just shrink some of Arthur's old clothing for you. He hates to admit it, but he's put on just a bit around the middle since the boys were born, so there's plenty lying about that doesn't fit him anymore."

Mr. Weasley made an indignant noise which Molly ignored in favor of bustling out and up the stairs. "Won't be but a moment, dear!"

Harry grinned. The Weasleys had always been unfailingly kind.

_xoxoxoxox_

Harry grimaced. This Molly and Arthur were less kind than their future selves. He was fairly certain they had used his need for clothing as an opportunity to get rid of things that neither wanted to remain in Mr. Weasley's possession.

The shrunken bell bottom denims were horrifying on their own, but were made so much worse by the powder blue tee shirt he now reluctantly sported. Emblazoned across the front in puffy orange letters was _The Billywigs! Stonehenge 1969, 'Stoned and Henged' Tour_. Orange vines writhed lazily all around the torso as florescent pink and purple flowers bloomed, spun, and floated about in a dizzying ballet.

Mr. Weasley had balked when Molly produced the shirt. "Not my Wigs shirt! That was an incredible concert!" Molly had snorted in response that she couldn't believe he even remembered it, what with all the "knotgrass you and Benjy smoked—don't think I don't know about that, Arthur Weasley!"
Bill had innocently asked what knotgrass was and why his dad would make it smoke, bringing an abrupt end to the argument.

Atop Mr. Weasley's beloved eyesore was what had to have been one of Molly's first attempts at knitting. Thick forest green yarn meandered uncertainly into what might look like a proper cardigan only to someone who abused knotgrass. But it was the purple stitching across the left breast which proudly, if shakily, proclaimed the sweater to belong to one "Artie," that really got to Harry. He had protested that he had no need of a sweater given the warm weather, but a slightly wild-eyed Arthur had insisted that he should take it lest he catch an unexpected chill. It was hardly a mystery why Arthur would be chuffed to get rid of the monstrosity.

With a self-conscious tug on the ill-fitting sweater Harry exited the fireplace at the Three Broomsticks, grateful that at least this time he didn't fall arse over kettle. A much younger and even more buxom Rosmerta glanced up from *Witch Weekly* long enough to widen her eyes at his clothes before shaking her head and returning to the gossip columns. He slipped out quietly.

The sun had set on Hogsmeade. Harry was at a loss, however, about where to go. It had been a short but exhausting day, and the stew he had devoured at the Weasleys' was becoming an uncomfortable lump in his stomach.

*Well I have to sleep somewhere.*

The inn was definitely not an option. He had only 3 galleons and a few knuts and sickles left, which probably wouldn't be enough for a room, let alone food. His first thought was the Shrieking Shack, but its popularity with tourists guaranteed he wouldn't be able to come and go during the day without being detected. Remus Lupin would likely be back at Hogwarts in less than a month as well, and Harry had no desire to run into the teenage werewolf version of his former professor.

*I bet Professor Lupin and Sirius would know all sorts of good hideouts.*

He could have smacked himself. *Of course Sirius knew where to hide around Hogsmeade! He'd spent all of last year shacked up in a cave on the outskirts of town!*

Harry scampered across the hills and through a field or two before arriving at the rocky outcrop where he was relieved to discover the cave still there, looking exactly like the last time Harry had seen it. The interior was empty of all the various species of beasties he had been imagining would be waiting for him in the dark. He idly considered tidying up the cavern floor and setting up house, so to speak, but he had nothing to set up. Not ten minutes after entering the cave Harry had passed into a deep sleep, the unfortunate Weasley sweater experiment balled up into a surprisingly serviceable pillow.

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14 August, 1976

Harry sat on a tree stump deep in the Forbidden Forest and stared at the dead rabbit in his hands.

He was so hungry.

Harry was no stranger to living on the barest of meals, but the past week and a half was enough to almost make him long for the Dursleys' house, where he could at least sneak enough to eat from the top of the rubbish bin when he was desperate.

Hogsmeade provided no such luxury. A few days into his stay at the cave, he had crept into the hamlet late at night, intent on rummaging through the dumpsters at the Three Broomsticks and
Madame Puddifoot's. To his great disappointment, he found only a complete lack of any sort of garbage receptacle in the entire village. Apparently, magical trash was dealt with by vanishing or banishing it in some way.

Being homeless in the wizarding world was much more of a challenge than he had expected.

It was during that long first week and a half that he had resolved never to contact Hogwarts or either of his parents. The realization he had at the Weasleys’ house that he could so adversely affect the timeline had left him paralyzed, afraid to commit any action at all.

(Though in the back of his mind he cherished the hope that he could find some way to prevent his parents' deaths. He knew the when, where, how, and who, so perhaps he could find a way to swoop in at the last moment and stop Voldemort. Granted, this would probably erase him as he was from existence, but his exhausted mind reminded him that he had a good five years to work that little snag out.)

At first Harry had felt heartened by coming to some sort of decision, but that decision also barred the only ways he could think of to get stable food and shelter.

The cave became the landscape of his limbo. He could not—would not—be able to haunt the margins of Hogsmeade for the next nineteen years, patiently waiting to catch up with himself. At the same time, he also didn’t dare become part of the wizarding world, lest he be discovered and shuttled off to Hogwarts. Hermione had told him once that magical children were required to engage in some sort of tuition until they could prove their control over their powers by passing their OWLs. The ministry could not find out that there was an unqualified wizard running about the area.

Three days prior he had finally decided to test and see if he could use magic without being detected. After deftly catching the withered late summer pears that he had summoned from a tree-top, every muscle in his body had tensed in full alert, his eyes wide and waiting to spy a Ministry owl winging its way to him. The owl never came.

Since then, he’d taken to using magic only within the confines of the cave or deep in the forest to avoid unwanted observation, and still cringed at each incantation in fear that this would be the one that the Ministry notices.

Being able to use magic was a godsend, but Harry soon realized that the Hogwarts curriculum was light on survival skills. He thanked the heavens that Hermione had taught him Accio so well, even if all of his attempts to use it to summon fish from a forest pond had thus far resulted in him being pelted with mud rather than fish.

But that morning he had finally conceived of a way of getting fresh meat. He had set himself a perch deep in the Forbidden Forest, and waited until prey happened by. When a rabbit had innocently hopped into the dell, he stunned it and used a magic-sharpened rock to give it a quick death. Easy.

Except now he was cupping the little rabbit’s body gently in his hands, the white fur delicate and soft against his skin. Its eyes were open and glassy.

Harry was so hungry.

But honestly, the whole thing made him sick.

What the hell is wrong with me? It's just a bunny! This is, er, the natural order of the world! Food chain or whatnot. I'll die if I don't eat, so it died and I'll eat. Stop being such a Hufflepuff about a bloody rabbit!
A speck of something blew into one of the creature's sightless eyes. It looked like it should bother the rabbit. But the rabbit was dead.

*I'm just freaking out because this is the first time I've killed something I didn't hate and that wasn't trying to kill me.*

...  

**Bottom line:** *I'm talking to myself and cradling a dead rabbit. This is ridiculous.*

With a small shudder Harry stood from the stump and placed the rabbit atop it. Crouching low, he used his rock knife to clumsily begin skinning his capture, an undertaking far messier than Harry thought it was supposed to be. After what seemed like hours, his task made all the more difficult because he avoided actually looking at what he was doing when possible, he was left with a lump of bloody flesh and an unsightly, gore-covered rabbit skin.

Although his internal voice chided him for his sentimentality, he couldn't just leave the skin as it was. Instead, he crossed to one of the more picturesque trees and silently dug a small grave for the skin.

*What the bloody fuck is that?*, his mind choked out as he turned back to his prize.

Standing between himself and the stump was a … something. *If he had to give it a name, he supposed he would have called it a horse, though there was something reptilian about it too. It was completely fleshless, its black coat clinging to its skeleton, of which every bone was visible. Its head was dragonish, and its pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither—vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they out to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet, the creature looked eerie and sinister.* Everything about the little beast's appearance screamed at Harry to run or draw his stowed wand, but instead, thinking fleetingly of Hagrid and Buckbeak, Harry looked it in the eye and then gave a deep bow.

The little thing made an odd chirping bark that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Meeting its eyes once again, he was startled to see it turn and look at the rabbit meat, and then move its gaze firmly back to Harry.

Guilt flooded through him.

"I—I killed the rabbit," he admitted, and suddenly the words tumbled out of him in an rambling flood. "I didn't want to, I swear I didn't, but I'm just so hungry, you see. I don't know what else to do! I'm just hungry and I'm stuck here."

And now he had reached the point where he was blubbering and justifying himself to a baby death stallion.

The beast regarded him steadily for several long moments, then chirped cheerfully, wobbled on its ungainly legs over to the stump, and snatched the meat with its mouth.

"Oi! That's mine!"

The baby death stallion—*really, what else can I call it?*—turned and tottered over to Harry. Looking him in the eye, it dropped the meat into his hand, and gave another merry bark.

Before he could question the action, Harry reached up and began stroking the thing's head with his unbloodied palm. The little creature literally *quivered* in delight at his touch and gave a rasping,
rumbling sort of purr. Harry couldn't explain it, but as he looked into the white eyes of the delighted little beast he felt unaccountably better.

And then the baby death stallion turned and made short work of the bunny hide's makeshift grave, digging up the dirt with surprising alacrity and happily latching onto the pelt with its jaws. Harry watched in bemusement as it took to tossing the hide into the air and attempting to catch it with its teeth.

Eventually its macabre game of fetch gradually took the beast out of the clearing, but Harry could hear it chirping happily as it continued its game deeper into the forest.

Shaking his head, Harry wrapped the carcass in leaves and left to make his way back to the cave.

Two beetle-black eyes watched him go.

xoxoxox

1 September, 1976

The sun had nearly sunk below the mountains, painting the sky and providing Harry with a breathtaking view of the hollows below his perch atop one of the wooded outcrops above Hogsmeade.

The train hadn't arrived yet, but it couldn't be long now.

He knew he shouldn't be there, shouldn't have risked coming to watch the Hogwarts Express pull into the station and empty itself of seven years' worth of students, but he couldn't help himself. Yes, he could admit that he hoped to catch a glimpse of unruly black hair, or streaming red hair, or hear the mischievous laugh of his young godfather, but that wasn't the real reason he was subjecting himself to an increased threat of discovery. Not really.

It had been nearly a month since he arrived in the past, a month since taking up residence in the cave and learning to support himself in the Forest. He had developed a routine and was enjoying steadier, if still usually unappetizing, meals. But this was just…subsistence. He just existed. It wasn't enough.

It had been nearly a month since he'd last seen or spoken to another human being.

Solitude had always been Harry's most constant companion, and even at Hogwarts he had never been all that social a creature, but a month of solitary confinement in the wild left him frayed, and he was starting to become, well, a little strange.

He often imagined Hermione and Ron, or sometimes the twins, with him in the cave, and would host long conversations with them before remembering that he was alone and just talking to himself. He needed other people much more than he had ever thought he would.

Indeed, the best thing about his solitary life in the forest was his slowly developing friendship with the baby death stallion, who had taken to unexpectedly scampering into his presence on silent hooves. He hadn't been able to stop himself from dubbing the thing "Colin." What else could he name a little beast that was overcome by an alarming level of ecstasy whenever it was in his presence?

Harry was startled when he realized he even kind of missed Colin Creevey.

So here he was, waiting in the shadows of the overhang, desperate to catch the sounds of human conversation.
The Express finally pulled in, and Harry caught his breath as the students streamed out, their excited voices drowning into a soothing din. At one point he thought he might have snared a glance of red hair, but it was lost in the human tide below.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

_Hagrid_.

He exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and flopped to the ground, a sharp pang piercing his heart at hearing his first friend's familiar call. Soft skin suddenly nuzzled against his right ear. Harry looked up to see Colin regarding him steadily. With a small smile he scratched the death stallion just behind his sort-of-ears, and smiled a bit more widely at the delighted purr he earned in response.

Then he felt something begin eating his hair.

Apparently, Colin had invited a friend. A light grey goat stood to his left, idly attempting to snack on a particularly wild thatch of hair on the side of Harry's head. Rebuffed, it bent down and began cropping the grass next to the boy.

Harry had no idea if such things as magical goats existed, but felt that a civil approach was best. "Um, hello…goat. Are you a friend of Colin's?"

The goat eyed him for a moment before returning to its meal.

Almost content with the most company he'd had since the Weasleys, Harry sat back and watched the stars grow brighter as the twilight shifted into black. Eventually, he realized Colin had departed for wherever baby death stallions must go at night, but the goat remained. Harry stood, his limbs creaking. "Well, goat, time to go home."

The goat looked at him.

"Er, good night, goat." Harry turned and began slowly navigating his way down the rocky outcrop. A clatter of hooves accompanied him. He looked up to see the goat following him down the rocks. Eyebrow raised, he continued his descent and then began walking the overgrown path back to his cave. The goat trotted beside him.

"You want to come with me?" The goat did not reply. Harry continued walking. The goat followed.

Upon his arrival at the cave, Harry turned. "Well, goat, I guess you're welcome to stay with me if you want. You, uh, don't already have a home?"

_Why do I keep asking the goat questions?_

"Well, okay, come on in." A thought struck Harry, who had looked closely at the goat and spied distended udders. "But you can't stay here for free. You're a girl goat, yeah? Well, you can stay here as long as you like if you let me milk you."

Harry, being a product of muggle suburbia, had no experience with milking any animals, but figured it couldn't be that hard. Having a supply of milk would allow him to drink something other than stream water, and he could even use it to make cheese (though his understanding of how to be a fromager was even less formed than his understanding of how to milk a goat).

The goat bleated and entered the cave. Bewildered with his new roommate, Harry shrugged and followed.
"You're tryin' real hard to die, aren't you boy?" The voice growled out of the darkness, abruptly rousing Harry out of a deep sleep.

A dark imposing figure, its hand outstretched with wand pointed at Harry, was outlined against the entrance of the cave. Movement at his side revealed that Goat had again been eating his hair as he slept.

Harry considered going for the wand in his back pocket, but knew that he had no chance of getting it before the unknown man cast at him.

He was startled that he wasn't more startled. Maybe he was just a bit too pleased to finally be talking to a person. "Are you going to kill me then?"

"Probably. Suppose it depends."

Harry knew it was pointless, but he wasn't just going to lay there and let some unknown person kill him. He tensed his legs to spring, but before he could do so, the man had silently cast a spell that streaked across the black of the cavern and hit him squarely in the chest. He immediately lost all feeling in his body below the neck and dropped as if boneless to the ground.

"Let's just see if you'll live the night or not, lad. Though I'm bettin' not." A sliver of moonlight illuminated the man as he moved in.

Harry's mouth dropped open.

"Dumbledore?"

Chapter End Notes

(*) *Order of the Phoenix*, ch. 1.

(*) *Order of the Phoenix*, ch. 10
1 September, 1976

The man quirked an eyebrow in surprise. “Aye, I’m Dumbledore. Though perhaps not the one you’re thinkin’ on.” He moved further into the light, and Harry looked on in shock as a man that looked a fair bit like Dumbledore appeared. *If Dumbledore had fallen on rough times, that is.* He was old, robed, bearded, long-haired, and tall, though his hair and beard were gray, his robes rather tatty, and his eyes, not hidden by spectacles, gleamed at him hard and cold, with no sign of a twinkle in sight. “I’m Aberforth. The famous Dumbledore’s brother.”

“Oh,” Harry said dumbly, “I didn’t know he had a brother.”

“Most don’t. Well, no matter. Time to see if I’m goin’ to kill you.” Before Harry could respond to that alarming declaration, the man shot another spell, this time at his left arm. The sleeve on Mr. Weasley’s sweater dropped to the ground. Dumbledore’s brother (and wasn’t that a strange thought) darted forwards and grasped his arm firmly, turning the inside towards him. He cast a quick *Lumos* and gazed at Harry’s bare arm, his face a bit surprised.

“Well fuck. Now I owe that oaf 2 galleons.”

His first conversation with a human in quite some time was not going as Harry had imagined it.

“Er, Mr., uh, Dumbledore, sir, are you still planning on killing me? And what does my arm have to do with anything?”

Dumbledore grunted. “Way you’ve been skulkin’ about lately, I figured you had to be one of his boys sent to spy on the village and the school, but you don’t have a mark on you.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, surprised and not a little offended. “Wait, you think I’m a Death Eater? Seriously?”

“Well obviously you aren’t. All his boys have that ugly thing on their arm, so I’ve heard. Still, can never be too careful. *Accio wand!”*

Harry was immediately grateful he’d kept his wand safely stowed in the back pocket of his bell bottoms. He felt it jolt sharply in his pocket, but his arse kept it firmly planted between him and the ground.

The other Dumbledore’s eyes widened. “You don’t have a wand, boy?”

“Uh, no. No I don’t.” As the man was apparently still considering murdering him, Harry felt no guilt in the lie.

“Well *dammit all!* Now I owe him 5 galleons!”

“Huh?” Harry was full of intelligent responses tonight, it seemed.

The other Dumbledore scowled. ‘That ruddy groundskeeper. We were talkin’ about you the other
day. Oaf was convinced you’re some sad little squib boy living off the forest ‘cause you’ve got nowhere else to go. I made you as a Death Eater spy. Bet him three galleons you were a wizard and two you were one of his.”

Harry was rather pleased that Hagrid hadn’t thought ill of him before he realized that Hagrid must have seen him. *Shite.* “Wait, this man has seen me? And you’ve seen me? I didn’t think that anyone knew I was here.”

“Like I said, you must be tryin’ real hard to die, lad.” To Harry’s surprise, Dumbledore settled himself comfortably on the cave floor. “You’ve been trompin’ through the forest so loudly just about all the things in there have noticed you. ‘Sides, it’s impossible not to see you at night what with that ridiculous shirt you’re wearin’. Every time I look out my back window I see pink and purple flowers dancin’ through the dark.”

This was proof. The Billywigs shirt really was evil. “Well, I wouldn’t wear the stupid thing if I had anything else!”

Dumbledore gave a humorless chuckle. “Don’t have to say much to convince me of that, boy. When I thought you were a Death Eater I figured you were wearin’ it to throw suspicion off you. Nasty folks tend to have more style, see.” Being well acquainted with the pure blood contingent of his own decade, Harry had to concede the point. “But Hagrid—’s the bloke I made the bet with—saw you with some thestral an’ was convinced you were a good lad. Usually can’t trust him on such things—thinks acromantula are kind-hearted little dears who’re just misunderstood.”

Yes, this man definitely knew Hagrid. And seemed to be on friendly terms with him, a real mark in his favor. But, “Sir, what’s a thestral? It’s just I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

“For fuck’s sake, boy, don’t call me ‘sir’. That shit’s for my brother. Call me Ab. Everyone does. Most forget the Dumbledore part of my name. It’s not convenient for ‘em to remember I’m related to the savior of the wizarding world,” the man spat out.

“Sorry sir. I mean, sorry Ab.”

“Hmpf. And a thestral is bony, scaled sort of horse. There’s a herd livin’ in the forest. Both Hagrid and I have seen you with the youngest of ‘em.”

*So Colin is a thestral.* “Oh, I didn’t know what it was called. I’ve just been calling it a death stallion.”

“A death stallion?” Aberforth deadpanned, then shrugged. “Suppose that’s actually not far off the mark. Thestrals are strange ones, that’s no lie, but gentle for the most part. Hogwarts trusts ‘em enough ‘round its children every year, after all.” At Harry’s puzzled look, Aberforth continued, “They use ‘em to pull the carriages that take the students to the school. Most of the students, of course, never realize it. Thestrals are mostly invisible, after all.”

Harry’s confusion continued. “But they’re not! At least I don’t think they are. I can see Colin just fine.” Though now that he thought about it, he had always figured the carriages just moved on their own.

Aberforth stared at him. “You named a thestral ‘Colin’ of all things? Merlin, you’re definitely no Death Eater.” He rolled his eyes. “Only people who have witnessed death can see thestrals, lad. It’s why that stupid name you’ve been using for ‘em is rather apt.”

“Oh.” Harry paused. “Um, what are you going to do with me now? If you aren’t going to kill me,
could you, y’know, lift the spell?” Another pause. “Please?”

Aberforth sat back and regarded him keenly. “Not sure. Why’d you steal my Amaltheia?” At Harry’s blank look, he explained “My goat, lad.”

“Goat? Oh, I didn’t. She just followed me home!” Harry cringed at that one. He sounded like a five year old with a new puppy. “I told her she could stay in exchange for her milk, but I didn’t know that she belonged to anyone. I’m sorry.”

“Hmpf. She’s been a fickle one since she was born, that’s true. So. Before I decide what to do with you—what are you planning on doin’ in these parts?”

Harry looked down. Well isn’t that the question. He sighed. “I don’t really know. I was just going to keep on as I have done, until I think of something else, I guess.”

“You’ve really nowhere to go? No family?” Aberforth pushed.

Harry shook his head. “I mean, I suppose I do have family,” the Potters and Evans families are alive, after all, “but I can’t go to them.”

A tiny sliver of softness entered Aberforth’s eyes. “It’s not right, what they do to you kids. ‘Specially in these times.” He sighed. “I suppose it’s hard enough being a squib. I won’t make it worse for you. Just don’t steal my goats, lad.”

Harry nodded dumbly, but his mind was awhirl. He thinks I’m a squib!? That’s…that’s…that’s actually kind of brilliant!. I couldn’t think of a better excuse to be a kid in the wizarding world who isn’t going to Hogwarts. And people barely seem to notice squibs, don’t they? “So,” he hesitated, “you won’t tell anyone I’m here?”

Aberforth grunted an affirmative, then paused. “Well, I’ll have to tell Hagrid. I don’t welch on bets, boy. But I won’t say anything to anyone else.”

Oh lovely, Harry thought. Hagrid is so great at keeping secrets!

“Well,” Aberforth slapped his knees and stood. “I’m off.”

“Wait! Sir! The spell?”

“Ah. Yeah. Of course.” With a wave of his wand Aberforth lifted the paralyzing spell and Harry gratefully could move again. He wasn’t fast enough, however, to dodge the next spell Dumbledore sent at him. Trained to expect the worst, he was surprised to see the sleeve of his Weasley sweater immediately reattach itself. A third spell hit his torso, and he gaped as the powder blue tee shirt turned a more sedate charcoal, the orange vines and bursting pink and purple day-glow flowers fading into nothingness. He snickered a bit as his tee shirt let out a weak, protesting whine.

“I’m tired of seein’ those ruddy ugly things lighting up the evenin’,” Aberforth explained. “Luck to you boy. You’ll need it in this world.” And with a small sigh he left the cave on silent feet.

A minute passed as Harry went over the conversation in his head. Then the old man barked from the path, “Dammit, Amaltheia! Get out here and come home.”

Goat blithely ignored the call. And the next call, and the next.

Aberforth trudged back into the cave.
“I’m not doing anything, sir! She just doesn’t seem to want to leave!” Harry protested before the old man could accuse him of something.


Goat ignored him and started in on Harry’s hair again.

Harry noticed the vein in Dumbledore’s forehead beginning to throb. This was always a bad sign with Uncle Vernon. “Er, Goat? Would you please go with Aberforth, Goat?”

Goat immediately rose and trotted over to Dumbledore, who stood glaring at Harry. Harry sent him an apologetic look. “I, er, think she prefers the name ‘Goat’ sir, I mean, Ab.”

Aberforth’s scowl deepened. With a low growl he left the cave, Goat walking serenely behind him.

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16 October 1976

Days passed into weeks, and the nighttime confrontation with his old headmaster’s brother remained the only meeting he had had with a wizard since coming to the Forest. Harry had become more used to a lonely life focused upon providing food for himself. Knowing that he had been spotted in the woods, he regretfully stopped hunting with his wand and instead allowed himself the use of magic only within the cave, where his wand lay hidden under a stash of leaves. Many lean days followed that decision. Initially he had attempted to make himself a bow and quiver of arrows, relying entirely on his four years of transfiguration training. They didn’t turn out so well. Professor McGonagall may have prepared him well for times when he needed a water goblet but only at a wombat on hand, but her classes had done nothing for him in terms of actual survival. Only the most generous critic could call the arms he had spent hours in the cave fashioning “bow and arrows.”

In what he figured was probably the latter half of September, he decided to simplify his approach and transfigured himself a rude slingshot. His seeking abilities, however, apparently did not translate to the casting of small rocks at prey. The first several days netted him no dinner and one black eye, the product of one embarrassingly ill-conceived attempt. Some experimentation late at night in his cave, however, provided him a better method. Harry had never learned enchantment, but he recalled Hermione nattering on about the ways wizards had discovered how to embed magic in objects. The details had long since passed from his memory, but through a long process of trial and error he managed to combine the Point-Me and banishing charms into small stones that he could shoot from his slingshot. He was especially proud of his method of “programming” the Point-Me spell to target specific animals. As long as he focused intently on the sort of animal he wanted to hit when casting the Point-Me, he could later cast the rock into a clearing where he knew an animal of that type was and the stone was almost sure to hit his prey. Of course, the charms were pretty weak. He had to have the animal he had targeted the stone to in sight, and the charms were only good for one shot per rock. Still, he found himself flush with meat and losing a bit of his alarming thinness. Now he just looked like he typically did after a summer with the Dursleys rather than the wraith he had been becoming.

Although he still felt a foreign thrill of pride—generously mixed with shock—at his success in magical innovation, he avoided casting more permanent magic on his cave. Sure, a long-term
warming spell would have been more than welcome, but he feared another visit from a wizard who might sense the active magic. Posing as a squib guaranteed his existence was happily ignored. He was loathe to give up his new-found freedom and, of course, potentially destroy the world as he knew it by changing the timeline.

His only regular company was Colin and, when she could escape Aberforth, Goat, whom Harry would dutifully send back to Dumbledore in the evening (usually after coaxing her into letting him milk her a bit).

He did have one other vexing encounter. One evening in early October his search for small mammals of the dinner variety was interrupted when he suddenly found himself face to face with a towering centaur, who was pointing the business end of an arrow (of much better quality and notched in a far superior bow than those he had once attempted to create, he couldn’t help but notice) straight at him.

“You do not belong here,” the massive chestnut centaur intoned, his malice obvious.

*Oh this is not good.*

Harry tried to swallow the lump in his throat and decided to be honest. It had worked well enough with Firenze back in his first year. “I know,” he responded simply. “But I am here. And I have nowhere else to go.”

The centaur pulled the arrow even more taut. “You do not belong here!” Furious spittle shot out from his mouth.

“Many things who live here now did not originally belong here,” Harry tried, thinking of the acromantula colony. “I only come here to hunt small prey, and have no wish to trespass on your, or any other forest dwellers’ territory.”

The centaur and Harry stared at each other for several long minutes. *I am going to die.* Harry had never missed his wand so much.

“You do not belong in the Forest. This is true. But you also do not belong HERE!” At this furious, almost unhinged exclamation Harry realized why he troubled the centaur so. It somehow sensed he wasn’t from this time, and seemed enraged at the confusion the boy was causing him.

Harry had no idea how to deal with this. He tried the truth, of a sort, again. “Yes. I don’t belong here, in that sense, that you’re, uh, thinking. But I, well, I came here unwillingly. I wish it hadn’t happened. But it did. And now I’m scared, and I’m just trying to…”

“What the hell am I trying to do?” “I’m just trying” he shrugged, all the while hopelessly looking the dark-haired centaur in the eye.

The centaur eventually lowered his bow, and then ran a hand through his hair. It was an exasperated gesture, one that strangely reminded Harry of his godfather.

“We do not hurt foals,” the centaur said, almost regretfully.

Harry understand his meaning and let out a shaky breath. “Thank you.”

Silence ruled the clearing for some time, too long, but Harry feared breaking it.

Finally, the centaur gave him a searching look. “Your first kill. You buried its pelt, did you not?”

Harry lowered his eyes at the memory of the first rabbit. He’d gotten past his aversion to killing innocent animals, and wasn’t sure how he felt about that. “Yes,” he said softly. “The thestral dug it up though.”
The centaur nodded slowly. “You are a strange wizard.”

“I’m not a wizard! I’m a—”

“I am uninterested in lies. I do not know why you hide your wand and use little magic, why you do not go to the school when you should, and I do not care, wizardling,” he sneered and began to pace, his black tail thrashing irritably. “But you are a strange wizard, and you herald strange things, Saturnius.”

“That’s not my name, sir, I’m—”

“It is not a name. It is a…” The centaur searched for the right words. “It is a designation. You are a child of Saturn.”

This was beginning to remind Harry of another strange conversation with a centaur. “Saturn? Another centaur once kind of implied it was Mars.”

“Perhaps you were once a child of Mars, wizard,” the centaur conceded, “but now you are of Saturn, of Kronos. Saturn is the lord of time and place, among other things,” he concluded with a very pointed look at Harry.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Then I suppose I may be a child of Saturn after all.”

“Saturn also is thought by some a harbinger…” the centaur said, more to himself than to Harry, then shook is head. “But such is the fodder of fools and poets.” He abruptly turned and made to leave the glade. “Do not venture beyond the stream banked by the blackberries, Saturnius.” And with that he was gone.

*Centaurs. Mars, Saturn, whatever. At least I’m still alive.* Harry had gratefully moved to a different part of the Forest to continue his hunt.

Harry hadn’t exactly enjoyed that meeting, but it was rather nice to talk with something that spoke back. Today, however, he was actively planning for his first conversation with a wizard since Aberforth, though his churning stomach and voice of common sense (which today sounded too much like Hermione) both warned him off the venture.

Not long after the first day of Hogwarts’ term, he started receiving…gifts. Every so often he’d find small parcels placed a few feet from the entrance to his cave when he returned from a hunt. Usually they were foodstuffs. Once he was delighted to find a warm, furry coat. Another time he smiled at a rough-hewn wooden flute. The identity of his anonymous benefactor had been obvious to him since he received that first tray of tooth-cracking rock cakes. Aberforth, it seemed, had informed Hagrid that the half-giant had been correct in his estimation that Harry was a homeless squib boy and not some Death Eater spy.

Apparently he had become Hagrid’s newest adoptee. Harry was rather touched that Hagrid was trying to care for him, yet still respected his privacy. At the same time, Hagrid’s apparent hesitancy to approach him made Harry wonder in a flight of fancy if the groundskeeper was relying on some book with a title like *Socializing with Squibs: A Guide to Mingling with the Magic-Less in the Wild!*

It was high time, in Harry’s opinion, that they meet properly, at least so that he could thank the man for his thoughtfulness. He couldn’t deny that the chance to see his old friend excited him to no end. *And,* his snide but honest inner voice reminded him, *you need to find out if he’s told anyone else about you.*

When Harry learned that Aberforth intended to talk with Hagrid about him, he was certain that the
more famous Dumbledore would show up not long after. Yet this hadn’t happened, and Harry was becoming more and more desperate to know if he should expect such a visit.

And so Harry had spent the last several weeks attempting to track Hagrid’s movements. There was no way he would venture to his hut on the grounds, so he had to catch him in the Forest. Eventually he discovered that the man regularly made forays in to feed the thestrals, and finally discovered that it happened every three days, early in the morning.

So here he was, the dawning sun just barely beginning to rise, about to willingly engage with someone he should probably avoid.

Colin snuffled into his hand as Harry hid behind an old holm oak. He’d arrived quite early to acclimate the rest of the thestral herd to his presence lest they complicate a meeting about which he was already nervous enough. Unlike Colin, they seemed only mildly interested in him, though the one that he suspected was his friend’s mother gave him a long lick up the side of his head that left his ear feeling strangely tingly. After the first few minutes, the adult death stallions ignored him.

All too soon he heard the sounds of someone approaching and the thestrals began milling together in anticipation. Harry’s breath caught in his throat as a younger, but still massive and bearded Hagrid entered, a boarhound hot on his heels and a giant bucket of raw meat in his hands. Colin raced off to join the rest of his herd. Harry smiled as Hagrid began addressing each of the thestrals, tossing chunks of meat to them in turn. He had to restrain himself from bursting into giggles when he learned that Hagrid called Colin “Caligo.” *Not all that far off from ‘Colin,’ really.*

Harry stayed behind the tree, watching and debating the best way to approach Hagrid. Colin had other ideas. As soon as he finished gulping down his bloody portion, he gamboled over to Harry’s hiding spot and barked loudly. Harry attempted to shush the little brat, but Colin instead latched onto his sweater with his hooked beak and unceremoniously began pulling him into the clearing.

“No, Colin, *dammit,* stop that,” he urged in a sharp whisper. Looking up, he realized that the entire herd of adult thestrals, along with Hagrid, had turned to stare at him as he stood only barely hidden by the tree.

“Thanks a lot,” he hissed at his equine friend, who gave a happy chirp and tottered off to his mother. **“Uh, hello. Sorry to interrupt.”** He gave a hesitant wave. *Did I just give a weird sort of half wave? ... Yes, I did. Kill me now.*

Hagrid was positively beaming. “Well, there ya are! I’ve been waiting fer ya to come an’ introduce yerself proper, lad!”

Harry’s tongue had suddenly become too large for his mouth, and all the words he had planned to say were swept away by his shock at finally getting to talk to someone. Someone he actually knew!

“Yer’ all righ’, yeah?” Hagrid’s smile had faded into an amiable concern as Harry stood and attempted to work the muscles in his face. “Bein’ in the Forest by yerself fer too long can make it strange to talk with people, ya don’ have ter tell me,” he smiled reassuringly. “Once spent a whole summer with me friend Aragog an’ his family. When I finally got back to Hogwarts I kept tryin’ to talk to Dumbledore in clicks and chitters, I did!”

“Yeah,” Harry choked out, but he managed to smile in return.

Hagrid chuckled to himself. “Well, I’m Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds here at Hogwarts. But mos’ everyone jus’ calls me Hagrid.” He stuck out his hand.
Harry couldn’t help but approach Hagrid cautiously. He knew Hagrid would never hurt him, but interacting with any person after all this time was just so weird.

Hagrid’s hand was as huge as he remembered it, and seemed to swallow up Harry’s much smaller one as the half-giant gently shook it.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Hagrid,” Harry said genuinely. “Um, I just came because I wanted to thank you for the stuff you’ve been leaving me.” Suddenly even more nervous than he had been, he rushed on. “I mean, I don’t want you to feel obliged to help me or anything, I’m doing OK, really, but I wanted you to know that I really do appreciate it, that’s all.” He paused for a breath. “I, well, I made you something, see. It’s not very, good, I know, but it’s, well, it’s the best I can do.”

With that he ducked back behind the holm oak and retrieved his gift for the giant. Inspired by Hagrid’s hand-carved flute, Harry had set himself to becoming something of a wood carver. The present had taken him more than a month of nightly labor and a not a few fingers had been mangled by his makeshift stone knife, but he was proud of the final result, a dragon figure carved from a large piece of nice aspen wood he’d happened across. He wasn’t being disingenuous when he admitted it wasn’t very good. It really was little more than a misshapen lump of wood that was originally supposed to be a hippogriff, but the wings had come out more dragon-like, and the thick body of a dragon was far more doable than the graceful lines of an equid. Hermione would probably say that is was an interesting example of modern abstract art, Harry had smiled as he polished his first creation. Indeed, the high polished sheen of the wood was perhaps its best feature. Figures. The one part of making the thing that I cheated and used magic for.

Hagrid stared at the dragon but said nothing.

Oh God, he hates it. Why did I think this was worth anything? He’s probably trying to figure out something nice to say before he chucks it in his rubbish bin!

Harry’s insecurities bit into him mercilessly until finally the half-giant raised eyes that Harry realized with a start had grown misty. “It’s beautiful!” He fairly gushed. “I’ve always wanted a dragon, see? Oh, isn’t he beautiful!” And now Hagrid was petting the wood just as he had once stroked a newly-born Norbert.

Harry’s face hurt from smiling.

“I’m really glad you like it.”

“S’ a true gift, it is!” Hagrid mopped at his eyes. Are those actual tears? “I told Dumbledore, I told him that you was a good ‘un! And jus’ look at this!”

Shite. Which Dumbledore?

“Oh, er, do you mean Aberforth? I met him once, and he did say something about that.”

Hagrid grinned, “Aye, he was all set believin’ you was a Death Eater, can ya believe it?” He snickered at Aberforth’s obtuseness and Harry nearly sighed in relief. “A’ course I also told my Dumbledore about ya as well. He likes to be kept up on what’s happenin’ in the Forest.”

Shite.

“You mean Albus Dumbledore? The headmaster? He knows I’m here?” Harry tried to keep his voice casual, but his apprehension bled obviously into it.

“Well I had ta tell ‘im, didn’t I? S’my job, see,” Hagrid exclaimed, then softened his voice like he did
when he was calming a spooked animal. “Don’t ya worry about him, lad. A great man Dumbledore is, a great man! He won’t hurt ya.”

Harry was hardly mollified. “But, he’s in the Wizenagmot, isn’t he? And I’m pretty sure that me being here can’t be, er, strictly legal? Doesn’t he have to report me to someone?”

Hagrid laughed. “Lad, there’s a war on! A real Dark Lord, jus’ like old Grindewald. Dumbledore an’ the aurors got much more to do than ta hassle a boy without magic who ain’t botherin’ no one. After all, I told him that Ab had checked ya out, and that ya even had a chat with ol’ Magorian.” His eyes grew a bit crafty. “No one’ll really notice. Unless ya got parents lookin’ fer ya, that is.” He didn’t state it as a question, but his tone hardly obscured that he was searching for more information.

“No, no one is looking for me,” Harry assured him in a vacant voice. He was at once deeply relieved that his headmaster wouldn’t meddle in his affairs and strangely disappointed in Dumbledore. Hagrid was essentially saying that Harry wasn’t important enough to merit anyone’s notice, including Dumbledore’s. While he had known since he was eleven that he definitely qualified as an “important person,” it had never occurred to him that his status granted him extra attention from Dumbledore. Now that he was thought a squib, the man had no interest at all in him. This was good for him, but…But shouldn’t a man tasked with the care of children be concerned with a homeless boy living in the wilderness of his backyard? Apparently not. Dumbledore was a great man, Hagrid was right, and Harry supposed that great men needed to devote themselves to great things.

But maybe…maybe he’s not necessarily always so good a man, he wondered.

Something else Hagrid said pulled him out of his morose reverie. “Wait, who’s Magorian?”

“Ol’ Magorian’s one of the elders of the local centaur tribe. Ran into ‘im a while back and said he’d had a nice, friendly little conversation with ya.”

Harry internally snorted. Trust Hagrid to call an interrogation at the end of a very sharp, very deadly weapon a “friendly little conversation.” He nodded his understanding, and a not quite comfortable silence stretched across the glade. Harry hated that he couldn’t think of anything else to say to his old friend, but we’re not friends. He doesn’t know me at all. “Well, I guess I should go and let you get back to your work.” He made to leave the glade from the entrance opposite the path back to Hogwarts.

“Wait, lad!” Harry paused and raised a questioning eyebrow as Hagrid nervously turned his hat in his hands. “It’s jus’, ya see, I know what the world can be like fer a kid that ain’t…like the others. I talked to Dumbledore about ya, and he said he didn’t mind if I, well, took you on.” At Harry’s puzzled look, he continued. “I mean, tending the grounds and all Hogwarts’ animals is a big job, ya know. I wouldn’t say no to some help, an’ I thought, if ya like, you could come and stay with me and be my assistant of sorts. I can’t pay ya much, but ya’d have a warm place to stay, and food, and some company. You don’ need magic ter do a good job of it, I can tell you! An’ I seen how the thestrals have taken to ya—they don’t do that fer most.” Hagrid stopped and looked at him. Tears threatened to prick at Harry’s eyes. God, Hagrid may not be a great man, but damn if he isn’t a good one.

Everything in Harry screamed at him to take the offer. It was Hagrid, and Hogwarts, and living in the cave wasn’t really living. He felt like he was slowly going insane, starved for any sort of interaction. He’d just started to carve a chess set, and while the first two pieces were really just rough blocks of wood, he could already picture Ron’s face on the knight and Hermione’s bushy hair on the queen’s side castle. He’d caught himself calling them by name the other night as he prattled on about nothing.
I think I’ve been alone for a very long time.

He could see it now, meeting all of Hagrid’s different creatures, eating in the Great Hall, nights spent by firelight telling stories old and new over massive mugs of tea and hot chocolate, Hagrid being his real friend again, finding a real home, a real purpose, becoming something again…

Destroying the world because of his meddling in a place and time that wasn’t his own, Hermione and Ron winking out of existence, himself one day disappearing because he accidentally did something that stopped his mother from marrying his father. Friends like Cedric made corpses. Because of me. Because I was selfish.

I think I may have gone a bit barmy at some point in all this.

Harry shook his head absently to ground himself in the now, and turned his eyes back to Hagrid. “I —I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you would offer this. It’s really, really nice of you.”

“Yer goin’ ta say no, though, aren’t ya.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I have to say no. It’s not that I don’t want to say yes so badly,” he had to bite his lip. “It’s just not...safe for me to be seen like that. There’s too many people, too many…” Too many ways to obliterate my universe.

Hagrid gave him a level, appraising look, a look he’d rarely seen on the half-giant’s face. “Yer worried about someone findin’ you. Yer not just livin’ here, are you lad? Yer hidin’ here.”

Harry couldn’t, wouldn’t, lie to his first friend. “I don’t think anyone’s looking for me,” he admitted slowly, “but I think it would be, well, really bad if they were to find me.”

With a nod, Hagrid mopped his eyes with his giant handkerchief, then lumbered over and enfolded Harry in a full hug. Harry couldn’t move in his shock. He couldn’t remember being really touched by someone since that night in the infirmary after the resurrection of Voldemort, when Mrs. Weasley had hugged him. His paralyzed brain observed that this was quite unlike any of the other hugs he’d received from the groundskeeper, who tended to crush him in boisterous bear hugs. This time Hagrid embraced him like he was tending to some fragile broken thing.

“’S all righ’ lad. I wish it could be different fer ya, thas’ all.”

Harry nodded mutely and gave Hagrid a small smile as he broke away from the man’s embrace. “I should go now. But,” he added, “maybe I’ll see you around every so often?” He hated how desperate he sounded.

Hagrid beamed. “’A course! You be safe now, yeah?”

Harry smiled and nodded again, before turning and heading back towards his hunting grounds, Colin hot on his heels.

“Wait!” He stopped at Hagrid’s shout. What now?! I can’t take much more of this today.

“What’s yer name lad? Have ter call ya somethin’!”

Harry cast about helplessly. He really should have figured out a pseudonym months ago, but it didn’t seem important when no one was around. Who should I be? His mind raced. RonVernonSiriusDudleyDracoFredGeorgeBillCharliePercyGinny—what?—NevilleSeamusDeanOliverDobbyGilderoy—oh for fuck’s sake.
“Er, I guess you can call me Harry.” He hedged, uncertain. Was he named after some unknown relative? Would this point to the Potters?

“How, huh? Well, I suppose that’s pretty close to Artie, after all!” Hagrid said with a wink and a conspiratorial chuckle.

*What in the world is he talking about? . . Oh, my Weasley sweater! The monogram! He must think my name is Artie and I’m trying to escape detection by taking a fake name. Really, with this and the squib business, Harry was starting to suspect he didn’t need to construct any elaborate falsehoods; if kept relatively quiet the people around him seemed to come up with much better cover stories than he could ever invent himself. “Er, I guess. But just call me Harry, please.”

“Harry what? Ya got a surname?”

Harry couldn’t help himself as he gave a reminiscent grin. “I’m just Harry.”

3 December, 1976

Harry dashed the rotted meat against his cave wall. The resultant *thwack* which echoed through the chamber did nothing to mollify his temper. His latest, rancid failure sulked at him from the cavern floor. He was forced to admit that he had no idea how to dry, cure, or salt meat.

He had known that winter would mean several lean months, and he had started attempting to preserve meat in mid-October, but his every effort ended in one type of failure or another. He had considered seeking Hagrid’s advice—he had seen the man only on the odd occasion here and there since their first meeting—but that would have clued Hagrid in to the fact that Harry was no longer doing so well at providing for himself, and he didn’t want the big man to worry (or to meddle). Sure, he knew that food preservation charms could easily extend his stores, but even if he weren’t worried about his magic being detected—a worry that was becoming less and less immediate as the days grew colder—he had no idea what those charms actually were.

There was nothing for it. He had to go hunting. Luckily northern Scotland, even in winter, provided ample prey. He’d even nailed a partridge just last week. However, the snow had been falling thick and without break for two days, and the wind continued to howl. The coat Hagrid had given him was a godsend, but it didn’t make up for the fact that it was too bloody cold and the snow was too deep for any sane person to venture out.

With a sigh he gathered his necessary tools, stowed his wand in its customary place deep in the cave under an assuming pile of dead leaves, and set out to the frigid wild of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry immediately realized that he would have to find success fast. His old trainers had already had holes in them at the Dursleys’, and the crumbling leather did very little to keep out the seeping damp of the snow. His fingers grew numb all too quickly. He hastened on.

*It’s worse having to do this alone. I miss Colin.* The baby thestral had disappeared with the rest of the herd in early November. Harry knew they pulled the carriages for those departing at Christmas, so they didn’t migrate. He figured they must hunker down for the winter in some sort of stable or whatnot.

He arrived at his favorite hunting perch, not too far into the Forest just off Hogsmeade, and waited in
the hollow of a great old tree for something to enter the glade. He had taken to charming two rocks each for every type of woodland prey he could think of, so he was set for just about anything that came by. Something would pass, he knew. Eventually.

It was twilight when he wandered into wakefulness. *What the—I fell asleep?! Oh, well done Potter!* Harry groaned as he experimentally started trying to flex his extremities. Not only was he going to be hungry and soaked for the evening, he was going to horribly sore from the uncomfortable position he had slept the day away in. When he got to flexing his feet, his self-disgust turned to mounting alarm. He felt nothing in them, as if his legs had been amputated just above the ankle. None of the pain, cold, or damp that he would expect registered. They just felt like they weren’t even there. Heart thumping, he brushed away snow and gingerly rolled up his trouser leg and pulled down the sock on one foot. It looked like the foot of a corpse, a macabre mix of gray, blue and purple. *This is bad. Really bad. I don’t think I can—no—I can’t fix this. I need help. Soon.*

It was at least a fifteen minute walk to Hagrid’s hut in fine weather, but Harry couldn’t think of another option. He had to make it there, through the snow, on feet he couldn’t feel.

*Well done, Potter,* his internal voice sneered again, suddenly sounding like Professor Snape.

Every step was agony. His feet registered no feeling at all, but the rest of his body stung with the biting pain of the earlier stages of frostbite. Soaked to the skin a few minutes into his trek, he began shivering uncontrollably. *I think that’s a good sign, yeah? Most of my body is still trying to warm itself up.*

Ten minutes in he became concerned he had lost himself in the darkened white world that stretched before him. One moment he would recognize a tree or a bend in the path, the next it seemed a foreign, alien tundra. After what felt like hours he exited the woods into a clearing he knew lay between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts.

He grinned with wind-chapped lips. He could do this.

His exhilaration made him less observant than he had been. His first step into the field faltered, and down he went. Flat on his back, his body stopped obeying his will and refused to be moved. It was rather comfortable here, after all. The stars looked rather lovely as the snow swirled and danced below them.

Harry absently decided he’d just rest here for a few minutes.

His dazed reverie was broken some time later when a large mass suddenly blocked his view of the stars.

“Hey, change the channel back! I was watching that show!” Harry slurred out in protest.

A long pause, a derisive snort, and then the mass bent down over him.

“Well, you sure fucked this up, didn’cha’ lad?”, the mass grunted at him.

Manic giggles bubbled out of Harry and filled the snowy night. “I’m really bad at meat!”

The mass shook its bearded head and sighed.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
III. Two Dumbledores

4 December, 1976

Harry woke to a pleasantly soft warmth around him and slightly less pleasant nubs poking into his face. Slowly opening his eyes, he saw only pale pearl grey, which, he found as he pulled back in surprise, turned out to be Goat’s underbelly.Apparently she had been cuddling him in his sleep. Goat spared him a glance but did not move from her comfortable repose, and soon turned back to munching on the straw upon which they were both laying.

A quick look around revealed him to be in a stable of sorts, teeming with goats who lazed around in the weak winter sunlight that streamed through the high windows. He himself was on a particularly thick bed of straw, covered in soft blankets, his still insensate feet bandaged. The whole large room seemed suspiciously warm given the storm that still raged outside. This was definitely a room belonging to a wizard, overlaid with multiple warming charms.

It felt like heaven.

Memories of the previous (he guessed) night gradually returned to him. It had been Aberforth who had found him and rustled him back to Hogsmeade. The trip was a hazy, surreal nightmare now, fits and bursts of pain, blinding white, deepening black, and Aberforth’s firm hands guiding him through the confusing blur.

Harry realized he had no idea where exactly Aberforth lived, or what he did in Hogsmeade. Apparently a herd of goats was involved.

There was no chance of him getting up anytime soon. His feet didn’t hurt, but they felt like great numb weights attached to the ends of his legs. Sighing, he nestled back into his hay. Goat languidly stretched and began nibbling at his hair.

Harry eventually fell into a comfortable languor and drifted off to sleep. Some hours later, the clank of the stable door startled him awake.

“You really are trying nine different ways to die, aren’t you boy?” Ab stood in the doorway holding a small wooden pallet with earthenware bowl and jug upon it.

“I—” Harry stopped. Really, what can I say? I didn’t mean to fall asleep in a blizzard without decent protection from the elements, but I had to hunt because I’d failed at providing for myself?

“Thank you for helping me.”

“Ah, go on. Ruddy oaf would ‘a never stopped his mewlin’ if I’d led you die.” He set the pallet on a hay bale near where Harry lay. “It’s soup. And water mixed with some healin’
potions. Eat and drink it all. I know it ain’t all that tasty.”

“Thank you,” Harry repeated. “I, uh, should be out of your way soon. My feet can’t be that bad.”

Aberforth glared at him. “Aye, you’ll probably be up and about in a day or so with the potions I gave you. Just have to wait for the black skin to fall off.”

Well, that’s bloody alarming.

The man sneered at Harry’s panicked look. “Ya got severe frostbite, boy! Lucky I didn’t have to chop both your feet clean off! Right now those feet are covered in dead skin and tissue. Once it falls off, you’ll have new feet, clean and worthless as a baby’s.” His scowl deepened. “But you ain’t gettin’ out of your debt so easy, oh no.”

“Debt?,” Harry yelped.

“You think these potions I’m givin’ you are free? That I’m made of galleons?,” Ab barked out. “You’ll also be eatin’ my food, usin’ my barn while you heal, and you’ll be needin’ somethin’ decent to wear on your feet before you can even think about going back to that cave a’ yours! All that comes at a cost. Ain’t no charity here.”

Merlin, I have nothing! How can he expect me to pay for all that?

Aberforth seemed to read his mind. “Yeah, I know you ain’t got squat in terms of gold. You’ll be workin’ your debt to me off, lad. Spect I could use some help with the goats – Amaltheia likes you well enough, daft bitch – as well as round the inn.”

“Inn?”

“Ah, bloody hell, don’t you know anythin’? It’s where you are, boy, around the back of the Hog’s Head Inn an’ Pub. It’s my place.”

Harry vaguely recalled hearing Fred and George talking about the Hog’s Head. It had been their destination for a number of late-night trips through the Honeyduke’s secret passage, trips which always netted a fair quantity of alcohol for illicit Gryffindor revelry. He’d never noticed the place during Hogsmeade weekends, but gleaned from the twins’ descriptions that it was a rather, well, dodgy place that most students didn’t normally enter.

“Oh,” Harry muttered dumbly, then rallied. “I really appreciate your help and I’m not afraid of hard work, it’s just, see, I think it’s a bad idea for anyone to know I exist. If I stay here, then–”

Aberforth rounded on him. “Course I get that. But you have a debt. You don’t strike me as the sort to welch on a debt, boy. Are you?” The challenge burned in his tone.

“I’m not that sort! But you don’t understand! I can’t stay here!”

The man scowled at him. “Might’a known. Worthless, ruddy kid–”

Harry recoiled, stung. “I’m not worthless!”

“Oh yeah?” Aberforth’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Then prove it!”

I don’t know anyone here, really. I’ve never even been to the Hog’s Head before. I’ve only met a few of the villagers more than once in my own time, and they surely won’t remember some squib enough to ever connect me with … famous me, if the future works out right. This … this shouldn’t be too
dangerous.

“I’m not the sort to welch on a debt,” Harry repeated softly. “How long do you think it’ll take me to work off what I owe you?”

The old man eyed him shrewdly, then snorted. “Potions, room and board, new boots, probably some better clothes, all that? Dunno, rightly. Never had a head for maths, but I’ll get ol ’Nappy to figure it for me. I’d say at least about three months or so.”

“Three months!” I am somehow going to destroy the world with this.

“At least,” Ab smiled wickedly. “So eat up, get healthy, then you can get to work.” He turned on his heel and left.

Harry furiously stewed over the indentured servitude his headmaster’s dour brother had somehow wrangled him into and tried to figure out ways to keep a low profile in the village as he choked down what Ab had rather charitably dubbed “soup.” By necessity he’d gotten used to all kinds of meat that he might once have felt a bit green about, but the stringy, greasy flesh in the soup made him warier than he’d ever felt when eating one of his own kills. He found himself strangely thankful for his near-starved state. Hunger really was the best sauce.

It wasn’t until long after he’d set the empty bowl and jug aside that he realized his term of unwilling employment with Aberforth was rather … pointless. He assumed he’d be doing menial tasks (he shuddered when his mind began comparing his situation to his life at the Dursleys), but these were all the sorts of tasks that a wizard could complete with only a flick of his wand. Sure, Harry could sweep a floor and muck out a stable, but Ab could magically do that in a fraction of the time that it would take Harry to do so manually, couldn’t he?

Why am I really here?

Perhaps Ab just wanted him to understand the importance of repaying debts, that no one got a free ride. He might not need the help, but having Harry work off what he owed might satisfy some sort of concept of fairness. He’d told Hagrid about Harry, after all, because he refused to welch on a bet…

Maybe. That’s probably part of it. I definitely don’t think he’s keeping me here because he’s lonely and wants company. The man doesn’t seem much of a people-person.

As Harry was drifting off to sleep that evening, it suddenly occurred to him that the three or so months Ab speculated he’d be working at the Hog’s Head meant that Harry would essentially be spending the entire winter warm and fed at the inn. There’d be no more tromping through the frozen tundra of northern Scotland in search of a paltry meal, at least this year.

Really, three months is a seriously long time for just some food, a few potions, shoes, and a bed with his goats.

. . .

What is he playing at?
Living with Aberforth Dumbledore, Harry concluded, was a little like living with a strange chimera composed of the Dursleys, Mad-Eye Moody, and Hagrid.

Like the Dursleys, Aberforth seemed to delight in creating impossible lists of chores for him to complete. Mucking out the goat pens was a daily requirement (*surely the goats can go two days without getting brand-new straw!*, Harry would grumble to himself), as was sweeping and mopping the barroom floor. His hands were perpetually pruney from all the dishwashing he’d been doing, itself a Sisyphean task as the pub’s glasses, plates, and bowls seemed to have “grimy” as their default state. The day before Harry had inadvertently let slip that he wasn’t a completely useless cook, so now he had little doubt that his list of responsibilities would grow once again.

Worst of all, however, was the fact that he had become intimately acquainted with the six guest rooms above the pub, rooms for which he was required to provide basic housekeeping services. All six more than proved that the inn’s dodgy reputation was well-deserved. During his first day as the maid, Harry had attempted to amuse himself with a game he dubbed “Identify the Stain.” The rooms provided endless material which, he soon discovered, he most certainly did not want to identify. This was a game he quickly found himself very uninterested in winning. Even the bedbugs seemed wary of Rooms 3 and 5 at times. Tomorrow was nothing to look forward to – he’d seen Yarda Gobermouch and a friend procuring Room 2. He shuddered. Thank Merlin the loos were self-cleaning unless someone did something in there that not even magic could handle. Harry was terrified of the day that such a thing occurred.

Aberforth, however, seemed grudgingly pleased. Harry had little doubt the Hog’s Head had ever looked so … not so disgusting.

Although the old bastard was a slave-driver, Harry’s life at the pub had thus far proven much more enjoyable than life at the Dursleys’. His chore list was impossible, but Aberforth seemed to understand that and never punished Harry for his failure to cross off every task. As long as Harry tried, Ab left him pretty much alone, though his tendency to call Harry “boy” left him seething. He hated when Ab sounded like Vernon.

It was rather nice living with someone who didn’t hate him. True, Aberforth didn’t seem to like Harry all that much either, but in this he reminded Harry of Mad-Eye Moody.

*Or, he would correct himself, the man I thought was Professor Moody. But the real Moody must have been like that as well, or Barty Crouch Jr. wouldn’t have been so successful at impersonating him.*

Either way, Aberforth’s grumpy, barking, crotchety manner was, like Moody’s, directed at everyone, which proved a nice contrast to the Dursleys, who targeted Harry alone with all their hate. No, Harry was becoming more and more certain that Ab classified everyone he encountered as either a fool, a bastard, a “worthless piece of shit”, or somebody that “could do with a good killin’.” The trick was figuring out into which group a given person fell. Harry was sure that he, like Hagrid, was a “fool,” the class of people whom Aberforth disliked the least. Others, like Yarda, the aging prostitute who had the morality of a cesspool and the hygiene to match, belonged to the “worthless piece of shit” category, that is, people whom Aberforth hated but didn’t think quite deserved to die. “Bastards” tended to be people with power who put on airs or who used their power in ways that Ab didn’t agree with, but whose social standing kept them from being “worthless pieces of shit.” Harry guessed that Ab’s brother (*strange that’s how I think of him so often now*) fell into that class.

Earlier that evening Harry had met first his person who “could do with a good killin’.”
A few hours after the winter sun had set, Harry brought a freshly-washed, if not actually clean, tray of glasses up from the scullery to the pub. Ab was surprisingly strict with him when it came to entering the public room. He was absolutely forbidden from coming in after 9 pm, and if Ab were to say the word “immediately” at any time, Harry was to leave and lock himself in the kitchen below. Much like his older brother, Aberforth declined to explain the reasoning behind these security measures. Given that the war was beginning to heat up and the clientele of the pub seemed to tend toward dodginess even without a war on, Harry surmised it had to do with the potential presence of dangerous persons.

On this particular evening, however, Ab was nursing Silvanus, his stud goat, who had been lethargic and ill all day. The pub was instead being handled by Ab’s part-time bartender, Quisby Rakefire, a weedy scarecrow of a man in his early twenties with straggly dishwater blond hair, a wheezing voice, and a wretched attitude. Harry had quickly learned (mostly because Quisby went on and on about it) that his uncle was the owner of the Three Broomsticks, an establishment which the young man fully expected to inherit after the aging Tabernus Brewster’s eventual death. He attributed his current lack of employment at said establishment to Tabernus’ blind and ill-conceived devotion to his only daughter. The litany of complaints, insults, and justifications ran on an endless loop whenever Quisby deigned to address Harry.

“Just you wait, squib, one of these days old Tab will realize little Rosie’s got nothing of anything between her ears. All she’s got is what’s between her legs!”

“I hate to see a family establishment like the ‘Sticks fouled up by a bint like Rosie! Shoving her tits in people’s faces isn’t the way to build up a loyal clientele! Believe me, I should know! Unlike her, I’ve been training for this my whole life!”

“And just because her uncle loves her so much, they think they can call me their squib! Uncle Tab’s been wrapped around Rosie’s fingers since she was born, see. His only child, and only family since Aunt Cybele died. Loves her as much as he loves the pub. But soon enough he’ll come round and see her for what she really is, mark my words, squib!”

And so on.

Harry wisely kept silent and nodded at the appropriate moments, taking solace in the fact that Quisby’s dream was doomed. He knew very well that Madame Rosmerta owned the Three Broomsticks in his own time (and that generations of students were quite loyal patrons because of Rosmerta’s penchant for letting her chest invade their personal space).

Sometimes being from the future was immensely satisfying.

Much like he had at the Dursleys’, Harry was becoming certain that he’d never hear his actual name again. To Ab he was always either “boy” or “lad” (the latter his much preferred choice). He couldn’t even remember Aberforth ever asking what his name was, come to think of it.

To just about everyone else, like Quisby, he was simply “squib.” Apparently, he would seethe, squibs don’t need proper names in the world of Hogsmeade.

“You will die unhappy and unfulfilled,” Harry silently promised him as he moved out from behind the bar. “Stop lazing about. Go and clear off the tables!” He immediately turned back to his copy of Broomstick-Loving Bombshells and bit into a plum.
A coarse, humorless chuckle interrupted Harry as he was picking up a plate on the first soiled table.

“Well aren’t you the helpful little squib?”

Steel blue eyes peered at him from underneath the hood of an expensive-looking but simple black cloak. Literally hulking over the small table, little but the eyes and dark mustache of the speaker, a brute of a man, was visible to Harry.

There was nothing for Harry to say in response.

“Well, squib? Cat got your tongue?”

Harry moved to pick up another plate. Ignore him. He’s already half drunk.

The man pounded his fist on the table, drawing the attention of the rest of the pub. “You don’t belong here, freak,” he spat.

Do not engage, his inner voice advised him in tones so icy calm that they chilled his temper.

Controlling his breathing he began a deliberate retreat. He barely restrained his shiver when he realized he had to turn his back on the man to get away.

“Don’t you turn your back on your betters!” The sound of a chair being violently shoved aside reverberated through the room.

A few patrons gasped, and then the pub fell completely silent. Harry didn’t notice one of the old regulars slip out the back. He did notice, through the reflection in the window, that the man was standing and pointing his wand at his unprotected back. Quisby, helpful sod that he was, only looked up from his perusal of naked witches to watch with mild interest.

He’s been drinking and is spoiling for a fight.

I won’t get out of this. The realization hit Harry like a bucket of cold water. All I can do is keep calm and do my best to control the fight.

But I don’t have my wand!, he shouted at himself.

Can’t be helped. I don’t have to win. Just don’t lose too badly.

Harry drew a deep breath in and turned around. “Have it your way, then,” he sighed.

The man’s face contorted in a manic grin. “Oh, I’m gonna make this last,” he practically purred, and immediately shot a Petrificus Totalus at Harry.

He was fast, but Harry, who just manage to duck out of the way, was faster. Before Harry could respond he found himself dodging a sizzling silver curse which had several regulars standing to their feet and reaching for their own wands.

That was a choking hex! Those can be fatal! Shite, he’s not playing –

On instinct he threw the plate he’d cleared from the table frisbee-style at the man’s head, and was satisfied to hear a thunk and an enraged curse. Harry had no time to think more before he was rolling forward towards his adversary to avoid the blasting curse that had been sent at the ground below him. He found himself within arm’s reach of the man, who seemed shocked at Harry’s sudden proximity.
While the man adjusted his position, Harry shot up to his feet and kneed the man hard in the groin.

_Fuck it. There’s already no honor in this fight._

As the man keeled forward, Harry grabbed the back of his head and slammed it against the solid wood table with as much force as he could. The audible crunch of the man’s nose echoed sickeningly through the room. Out cold, he slid boneless to the floor and Harry quickly devested him of his wand.

The fight had lasted less than thirty seconds.

“ _You dare_ take a wizard’s wand?!” Yarda hissed in shock from a corner, the ringlets in her brassy wig bobbling as she trembled with rage and fingered her own wand.

“Lad! _Immediately_ get to the kitchen!”

Harry turned to find a breathless Aberforth standing in the doorway, wand out, rage mounting. Behind him Dalcop Shicker, the regular who had apparently rushed out to find Ab, gaped at the scene.

Without a word Harry walked to Ab and handed him the man’s wand before slipping through the door to the stairs and descending to the kitchen.

As the door to kitchen shut, he could feel the automatic defensive wards raise and finally let himself release his breath.

His whole body was shaking with adrenaline.

_I was—I was—I was,_ his mind stuttered in shock, _I was just in a barfight!_

_Holy shite, I was just in a real, actual barfight._

His hands felt like noodles.

_With a grown-up wizard._

His mind boggled.

_And I won._

_I – I won my first barfight!_

Grinning stupidly, he flopped down to his arse and permitted himself a few moments to bask in his own unexpected awesomeness.

Then he slowly got up and got back to washing the dishes, hearing Ab’s bark in his head saying, as usual, _Job’s not done yet, lad!_

About half an hour later Aberforth strode into the kitchens, pulled his wand, and conjured two identical wooden chairs. “Sit.”

Harry sat.

Aberforth set himself in the chair across from Harry and looked him in the eye with a fathomless expression. “Would you care to tell me why you chose to duel with Walden bloody Macnair in my pub tonight?”
Macnair?! But he’s a Death Eater! He was in the graveyard! … And wasn’t he the ministry guy sent to kill Buckbeak? I just fought him? I just beat him?

Harry was fairly impressed with himself, but doubted Aberforth would want to hear about that.

Sobering, Harry took a moment to gather his thoughts. He wanted to yell and protest that it wasn’t his fault, but that wouldn’t work so well on Ab. Deep breath …

“I didn’t duel with him. I fought him.” He paused. “And I didn’t choose to fight him. He wanted a fight, he wanted to hurt me from the moment he saw me. I wasn’t getting out of there without a confrontation.”

Aberforth sighed.

“I’m not sorry,” Harry declared honestly. “I mean, I’m sorry it had to happen, and I’m sorry it happened in your place, but I could either try to run and get hurt pretty bad, or take my chances and fight the bastard head-on. I’m not – I’m not sorry about how it went.”

“I know,” Ab agreed simply.

“I’m always going to choose head-on.”

“I believe you.”

“I’m really not sorry.”

“I know.”

This was not going how Harry’s conversations with adults after dramatic, violent events usually went.

“Er … Am I supposed to say something else?”

Ab chuckled wryly and looked into an imagined distance as his fingers idly attempted to straighten his beard. It was as much a lost cause as Harry’s hair was.

“No, I suppose there isn’t anythin’ else for you to say,” he finally concluded.

Oh God, he’s going to kick me out.

“You’ve left me a fine mess though. Fucking Walden Macnair, of all people. You know who he is, right? Who he belongs to?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “Yeah, pretty sure I do.”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “Yeah, pretty sure I do.”

Ab grunted. “Well, we’re bloody lucky that he’ll be too humiliated to press charges against you. Can’t let anyone, particularly his master, find out he got his arse handed to him by a thirteen year old squib.”

Harry bristled. “I’m fifteen!”

“Bah, same difference.”

“Wait – you said he won’t press charges?” Harry donned his native Gryffindor indignation like a favorite sweater. “What the fuck? He attacked me! Shouldn’t he be worried that I’m the one who’ll press charges? What the hell would anyone arrest me for?!”
Aberforth looked at him, really *looked* at him for a long minute. Harry shifted uncomfortably under his penetrating gaze.

“Boy, I didn’t take you for stupid. A fool, sure, but not stupid.”

Harry pulled a puzzled face.

“You’re a squib, Harry. A disowned, no family, squib. You’ve got no rights to fight against wizards, don’t you *know* that? You could get a year in Azkaban just for pickin’ up Macnair’s wand!”

*No fucking way.*

“What?!” Harry couldn’t stop himself from yelling this time. “That’s … that’s so unfair! *Really?*”

Ab kept his keen eyes on Harry. “Since when does fair matter to us?” He shook his head. “Can’t reckon how you’d *not* know about all this. Squibs have spent years campaignin’ for better rights, though it didn’t do ‘em much good.”

Harry shut his mouth with an audible clicking of teeth.

“Anyhow,” Ab went on, “Yarda and some of the others are right hacked at off at you, worthless pieces of shit that they are, but I don’t think they’ll do anything about it. Macnair’s been shipped off to St. Mungo’s, and you can bet he won’t report you. And,” he laughed a bit, “you at least impressed Dalcop, Dung, Pel, and the rest of that lot of fools. But if there wasn’t a target on you before, you can bet your lacy little panties that there’ll be one now.”

*He's not going to kick me out.* The certainty hit Harry like a cool breeze. He nodded mutely.

Ab coughed a bit uncomfortably. “Well done though, lad. Can’t get angry with you for fightin’ when you had to. Merlin knows I always preferred to settle my scores with the business end of my wand as well. And as for Macnair, *hmpf,*” he rose from the chair, “that’s a man that who could do with a good killin’, make no mistake.” He turned and called as he made to leave, “Off with you. Go and sit with Silvanus, make sure he’s doin’ all right. I’m goin’ to finish cleanin’ up this mess.”

“Ab?” Harry’s voice sounded young even to his own ears. “There were at least a dozen other people there.”

“I know.” Ab paused. “Lotsa witnesses.”

“None of them helped me.” Harry quickly backtracked, “I mean, I know that Dalcop went and found you, but … other than that, no one helped me.”

Ab’s face hardened. “I know.”

Harry wanted to ask him *why,* wanted to ask him *how* mostly decent people could stand by and watch a kid get hurt – maybe even killed – by a man with a wand who was twice his size. He wanted to ask these things, but looking at Ab now, he realized he already knew the answer. He just wished he didn’t, wished there were a better one.

But, like Ab, he knew.

Ab lowered his eyes and nodded. He knew that Harry knew now too.

“Off with you, Harry.”
As he heard the stairs creak under Ab’s weight, Harry flushed with pleasure.

*He called me Harry.*

Later that night, Ab came in to see how Silvanus was, and clucked with mild approval over Harry’s ministrations.

After he left, Harry noticed a mug sitting on the hay bale by his own straw bed. It was filled with hot cocoa, marshmallows and all.

Harry couldn’t stop grinning.

*And this is why Ab is also like Hagrid.*

Sure, he didn’t want anyone to know, but Ab could be as gentle and kind as the half-giant, even if he acted like Moody most of the time. All one had to do was to consider how he treated his goats. Harry didn’t know why the old man cared for the animals quite so much, but he always took care that they had a clean place, that they were fed well, hell, he even sat with them when they had a cold!

And as for his treatment of Harry …

At first Harry had been rankled that he was relegated to sleeping in the attached stables when half the guest rooms were usually unoccupied. But after a few days of cleaning those rooms, Harry was immensely grateful for his sleeping assignment. No magic could make those rooms less abysmal. The stable, on the other hand, was by far the cleanest part of the inn, and the only room which actually received any sunlight due to the absence of the grime which rendered the rest of the inn’s windows an opaque gray at best. Unlike the stained and crusted blankets and sheets spread on the guest rooms’ beds, Harry’s were soft, thick, and immaculate, if well-worn, in comparison.

Ab had given him the best room in the house.

And now he had left hot cocoa for Harry, knowing that he must be upset by the events of the evening. He sat for several moments, looking at the steaming mug and thinking hard.

*Ab isn’t the sort to say the right things, like his brother is.*

*Ab just does the right things.*

No, Harry couldn’t stop grinning.

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**17 December, 1976**

A few days after his fight with Macnair, Harry was busying himself cleaning the upstairs sitting room. It was the only place in the inn, aside from the stable, that Ab strictly demanded be kept tidy.

Harry didn’t really understand why. Patrons never spent any time in the area. There were only a few chairs and low tables, a bookshelf that was empty but for two slim volumes, and a large painting. At first he had thought it a nice, if rather bland, standard landscape of the British countryside. After a while, however, he noticed the figure of a woman, maybe a girl, far off in the distance, meandering
slowly down a long, winding road.

The woman never came close enough to make out her features.

Having given the rest of the room a thorough cleaning, Harry rummaged through his little crate of supplies and found a small bottle of *Madame Tousar’s Amazing Art Aider*, which guaranteed to brighten paintings and the quasi-lives of those within them in just one application. Shrugging, he decided to give it a try and applied a small dab to his rag.

“Don’t you *dare* touch her!”

Harry jumped at the harsh voice that had broken through the silence of the morning. His eyes widened in shock when he realized that it had been Ab who had spoken to him like that.

The old man crossed the room in three great strides and slapped the rag out of Harry’s outstretched hand as he growled, “What the fuck are you doin’ to her?” Without waiting for an answer, Ab moved in closer and with one hand pinned Harry to the wall by the scruff of his shirt. The other hand held his wand. Which was pointed straight into Harry’s face.

Harry flinched back violently. “I – I – Ab?,” was all he managed to gasp out before he froze.

Ab’s eyes were wild and furious, but the rage in them slowly ebbed as he stared at Harry, who was relieved to see the resemblance to Vernon Dursley fading. Eventually the old man seemed to realize the threatening position he had taken relative to the much smaller boy and glanced quickly at the painting. At once he blinked, his face almost embarrassed, and backed away.

Harry stayed with his back against the wall, entirely still.

Ab stowed his wand and began making the sort of calming gestures one uses on a wild, injured animal, though they seemed directed as much at himself as they did at Harry.

Harry felt his legs give under him and he slowly slid down the wall. He sat there, arms around his knees, and cautiously regarded the old man. His mind was blank, and he had no idea what he could say.

Ab was staring at the painting now, and Harry couldn’t resist taking a look. *This is all just so weird and confusing and awful.*

The woman – whom he saw now was a girl probably not much younger than himself – had moved to the very foreground of the painting. Indeed, most of the landscape was now obscured by her figure looming in the stone gateway that framed the painting. She was pretty, he noted vaguely. Dark blond hair, vibrant blue eyes that twinkled in the painted sunlight, refined, aristocratic features. She probably would have been popular with the Hogwarts boys. Her expression, however, was truly thunderous. Rage was expertly mixed with disappointment as she stood there, hands on her hips, glaring down at the old man who didn’t seem able to meet her eye for any length of time.

Ab put his head in his hands.

Harry said nothing.

The girl frowned.

“I’m sorry.”

For a moment, Harry thought he had imagined it. The voice that apologized was soft and sad, so
different from the ruthless one that had lashed at him minutes earlier. *No, that was definitely Ab speaking.*

The man looked at the girl. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, his expression bleak. The girl seemed to scoff lightly and looked pointedly at Harry.

Ab shut his eyes tightly, then opened them and looked down at Harry.

“I’m sorry, Harry.” He looked so much older than he usually did. “I didn’t – I didn’t mean to do that.” Ab gazed at his hands, which he was holding out a bit, palms up. “It was … I’m sorry.”

And then he was gone, fled the room as suddenly as he had entered it.

*What the hell was that?*

Harry wasn’t sure what to do. He really didn’t want to go downstairs at the moment. Ab seemed like he wanted to … be alone. Standing shakily, he looked at the girl again.

She was giving him a small, shy smile, the glare she had directed at Ab long gone. Her hands twisted nervously in the old-fashioned blue pinafore she wore over her gray dress.

“Hello, er – miss,” Harry finally spoke, trying to remember his manners.

The girl’s smile widened.

“May I ask who you are?”

Her smile crinkled in small vexation as she shrugged.

“Uh, do you not know who you are?” Harry winced internally at the likely stupidity of the question. He’d met plenty of wizarding paintings, none of which had ever suffered amnesia.

The girl gave him the sort of look that such an idiotic question deserved, and then made a rueful face.

Harry thought. “Oh! Are you unable to speak?”

She smiled sadly and nodded.

“I, well, I guess I’m sorry to hear that … I’m Harry, by the way. I kind of live here now. At least for a bit.”

This was met with an eager nod.

“Wait, do you know about me?”

Another nod, accompanied by a finger pointed at the door.

“You want me to go?”

An eye roll. She pantomimed a long beard.

“Oh! Ab told me about you?”

She smiled an affirmative.

“So, um, are you related to Ab?”
Another affirmative. He was getting better at this. Harry noticed that the girl’s eyes twinkled when she smiled.

“Hmmm. Are you his … mother? Or maybe his wife?”

This earned him a sharp glare.

“Oh, that’s a definite no to both … his daughter maybe? He sure is protective of you.”

She initially smiled at this, but her eyes were sad as she shook her head.

Harry thought hard. Her dress was old-fashioned, maybe Victorian? And the headmaster was, what, at least 125 years old …

“You’ve got to be his sister!”, he exclaimed triumphantly.

More smiling, more eye twinkling. Yes, this girl was definitely a Dumbledore.

“Well it’s really nice to meet you, Miss Dumbledore. You’re the first Dumbledore I’ve met that isn’t ancient and bearded. And a man.”

She gave a long, silent laugh at that.

Harry, though, wasn’t sure what to say at this point. It was hard having a conversation with a two-dimensional girl who couldn’t speak. He decided to voice his most immediate concern.

“Is Ab okay, do you think?”

The girl swayed her head from side to side, her mouth an uncertain line. Eventually she gave a small nod.

Harry puzzled that response out slowly. “He’s upset, and so he’s not exactly okay, but he will be?”

She clapped her hands.

“I don’t really know what I did wrong,” Harry admitted. “I’m sorry if I did something to offend you, or him ... I guess I just don’t understand and I don’t want him to hate me or anything. He’s just been pretty good to me, you know?”

The girl nodded, and that went through a complex series of motions that Harry was able to translate as, essentially, “you didn’t really do something wrong, but this is very complicated.”

Fair enough, I guess.

They both eased themselves into a comfortable silence. The girl stayed near the foreground, but bent over to pick some flowers as Harry mused over this new development.

“Miss Dumbledore,” he finally said, and the girl looked up brightly from her gathering. “I don’t mean to offend you or anything, but are, um, are you, well, dead?”

The girl smiled sadly and nodded.

“Oh. Well, I’m really sorry to hear that.” Harry found that he really was sorry about this. “Still, it’s nice to meet you, even like this.”

The girl gave him a strange look that he was utterly unable to translate. She slowly pulled a lovely
little corncockle out of her bouquet of wildflowers and pressed it against the canvas. A pointed look brought a confused Harry up close to the portrait.

Her face took on a distant, focused expression and, to his amazement, she slowly pushed the flower through the canvas. He hurried to grasp the flower as it inflated from two dimensions to three.

Harry looked at the flower in awe. It was leaving little streaks of green and lavender paint on his hands, but it was real.

This was definitely not normal.

“That, Miss Dumbledore, was bloody brilliant! Thank you!”

She gave an exaggerated curtsy and clapped her hands as he carefully wrapped the flower in a tea towel and put it in the inside pocket of his Weasley sweater. As soon as he was done she picked up the book she had been holding from the ground and held it imperiously before him.

“Do you want to send that through as well?”

An eyeroll, and then a gesture to the wall behind him. The wall that held the bookshelf.

Oh.

He picked up the two lonely books on the shelf and, sure enough, one was identical to the one in the painting. *The Fairy Ring: Collections of Tales and Traditions for Young Ladies and Gentlemen* was scrawled across its leather cover in faded gold-leaf.

“Do you … would you like me to read to you?”

The girl nodded eagerly and made herself comfortable on the landscape’s ground, her eyes alight. Harry found a bookmark in the volume and opened to the page. Clearing his throat a bit nervously, he began.

“The story of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur. Once upon a time in the land of Crete …”

As he read on, he failed to notice the faint footsteps of someone walking away from the door and down the stairway.

Aberforth sat at the bar in shock. The conversation between his sister and the boy had been sweet and upsetting and somehow horrible. Both were so bloody innocent, and the world was not kind to children like them.

But the corncockle … How in the name of Merlin had Ariana done that? It was a known fact of magic that nothing in wizarding paintings could be translated into three dimensions, let alone whatever his sister had done.

Some magic, he supposed, was quiet and awesome and never meant to be understood. It just was.

And then the boy had read to her in those damnably halting, shy tones of his. The voice of child who wasn’t used to anyone listening, and who hated to bother anyone with his thoughts.
It was the same voice Ariana had used around everyone, but for himself.

The boy still spoke like that around him most of the time, and it probably get worse after what had transpired between them in the sitting room. Only once had the kid spoken with any real steel, the night he justified his actions against Macnair. That had been the voice of the man the child could become.

He’d like to hear more of that voice, he admitted to himself.

Eventually Harry had to go downstairs to help prepare the pub for its afternoon opening. He found Ab sitting behind the bar hunched over a glass of Muggle whiskey. In front of the chair opposite him was a steaming mug of hot cocoa.

Harry took the hint and sat down.

“She's name was Ariana. She was my sister,” Ab stated flatly.

“I know.”

Ab nodded. “I loved her more than anything. She had been … damaged, hurt as a child.”

“I see,” came the soft response.

“She died.”

“I know.”

Ab stayed absolutely still, staring at Harry. “I might’a been the one who killed her. I don’t know.”

Harry regarded him with a penetrating gaze. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Not now.”

“Okay.”

The two, one an old man, one not yet a man, sat quietly and drank their chocolate and whiskey for a long while.

Ab chuckled without humor. “You’d not make a half-shit bartender, lad.”

Harry smiled a bit. “Thanks.”

They continued nursing their drinks.

“I’m sorry, Harry.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

“I loved her more than anything.”

“And she loved you. You can tell by her portrait.”
Ab shuddered. “I wish sometimes she hadn’t a’ loved me.”

Harry barked out a bitter laugh that seemed too loud in the silent pub. “Old man, I didn’t take you for stupid, a fool, sure, but not stupid.” Ab looked at him in shock as Harry continued. “Didn’t you know? Sometimes you can’t pick the people who love you any more than you can change the minds of people who should love you but don’t.”

Ab gaped.

Harry smiled, feeling a bit bold. “Now maybe we should get the pub ready to open. You wouldn’t want to disappoint the drunks, whores, and scoundrels expecting to get fed and watered, would you?
It Takes A Village

Chapter Notes

Please note: this is not a "bashing" tale. In this and the following chapters some canon characters will appear, and they may not appear in the best light. I am trying to follow canon as much as I can, which also regularly notes that these characters weren't perfect people (especially those who are teenagers). Moreover, as Harry is in a very different social position, both he and others he meets will react differently to each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It Takes a Village

19 December, 1976

Ab shook his head in disgust when Harry brought up the tray of shrunken crispy pig’s heads from the kitchen.

“I’m tired of lookin’ at ya, lad. Get out and go get yourself somethin’ else to wear. You’re an embarrassment in those clothes, an’ sayin’ you’re an embarrassment in a dive like this is really saying somethin’.

Harry blinked in surprise. “Now? But, but there’s people here. Don’t you need me?”

The small group of men lazing about the bar in the weak afternoon sun laughed.

“We ain’t ‘people,’ my young friend!” Peloother Pepst snorted, “We’re regulars!”

That earned a louder chuckle from the barflies. Dalcop Shicker took a long pull of his drink and slapped Peloother on the back. “Thas’ a good un’ Pel!”

Pel and Dalcop had quickly become Harry’s favorite regular patrons, both for their good humor and the fact that neither called him “squib.” The two were nearly permanent features on their barstools, and neither ever seemed to be without the other. They even finished each other’s sentences sometimes. In a strange way, they reminded Harry a bit of a late middle-aged and very drunken version of the Weasley twins, though the two looked nothing alike. While Pel was a broad, well-built man with long iron grey hair that hadn’t seen a comb since the 60’s, Dalcop was a short and plump (to put it generously) man with a friendly round face so large that it seemed to have pushed all his straw blond hair into a retreat from the top of his head. Gin blossoms bloomed happily red across the wide expanse of his nose.

Harry had learned that Dalcop was the head of lift maintenance at the Ministry of Magic, a fact which had initially alarmed him because of the man’s connection with the government. These fears were put to rest when Harry realized that Dalcop didn’t much care who he was or where he was from, as long as he had his pint in front of him. These days Harry was mildly alarmed by Dalcop’s
job for different reasons. He vowed that, if he ever had occasion to go to the Ministry of Magic, he
would never ride in the lifts. The man was never sober, and that couldn’t bode well for the integrity
of the magical transports whose care he apparently oversaw.

Besides, he had wondered, how much maintenance can those lifts really be getting? The man’s
always here, after all.

He had been shocked to find out that Dalcop was married, given that he spent all his time at the
Head. Vera, the lady in question, had never been seen by him or, apparently, anyone else who
frequented the pub. Late night owls, whose messages (often Howlers) Dalcop would immediately
hide, were all that attested to her near-legendary existence.

Peloother, unlike his counterpart, averred that he “never had time for a wife” and boasted a sharp
intelligence that was only moderately muffled by his penchant for spirits. When Harry had asked
about his profession, Pel had laughed and only claimed to be a “freelance anthropologist of my
fellow men, with a specialization in dregs and underbellies.”

Harry had responded innocently that he hadn’t thought wizards even knew what anthropologists
were, at which point old Pel had let fly a laugh that sent White Rat Whiskey out the man’s nose.

“You can do magic without a wand!? Wicked!”

Pel had shook his head and laughed off Harry’s deep admiration. “Nah, it’s not all that much, my
friend. All wizards could do this if they tried.” At Harry’s questioning look, he continued. “You’d
know all about accidental magic, yeah?” Harry nodded. “Well one of the reasons kids are so good at
it is that they have fewer thoughts banging about their heads. For example, when a little ‘un wants a
toy, he wants it now, and he wants it fully, with his entire being. Ain’t no other thoughts about
making dinner, or angry bosses, or needed to clean out cupboards scampering around their noggins.
Just pure thought aimed at a single purpose. That’s when you’ll suddenly see that toy fly across the
room and into his grubby little paws. Well, it’s not like that ability goes away when magic folk get
older. We could still do all that if we could just concentrate fully and absolutely on what we need.”

Harry suddenly remembered doing a wandless Lumos on the night the Dementors attacked him. He
had truly been focusing on his need for light.

Pel continued, unaware of the connections Harry was making. “Trouble is, it’s a lot tougher for us to
do that ‘cause of all the extra clutter in our heads. Plus, we have wands, ‘a course, so it’s not like we
really need to try all that hard.”

Harry nodded. That made a lot of sense. “So why did you learn how to do it then? You’ve got a
wand and all.”

Pel shrugged. “I’m always misplacing it before I go to bed. Then I’ll want a smoke, and it’s not there
when I need it. So I figured out how to do a nice Incendio just with my hands.” He smiled. “Lets me
keep my cheerful, lovable disposition, after all.”
This would be incredibly useful, Harry thought, his mind split between his cave where his wand still (he hoped) lay hidden and his fight with Macnair. True, he really didn’t want anyone to know he wasn’t a squib, but it couldn’t hurt to prepare himself for times when he was in over his head.

“So can you do all sorts of spells then?”

“Nah. Takes awhile for adults to be able to do even one. The “clearing your mind” bit is right tough, you know. It’s kinda like a muscle. You can train up to get good at one or two spells an’ after a while your body and your mind just remember how to do that spell on its own. Me, I’ve really only ever worked on _Incendio_ and _Lumos_. Hate getting outta bed and all that. Been meaning to try _Accio_—that’s the summoning spell—but I ain’t found the time yet.”

Since that day Harry had taken to silently working on _Accio_ late at night and in the early morning from the safety of his stable. He’d managed it a bit, but was coming to understand just how hard it was to “clear his mind” and focus only on his desire for his target to come to him. He planned on learning to cast three spells silently—_Accio, Depulso_, and either _Lumos_ or _Alohamora_. Together, those should help him get out of trouble he absolutely couldn’t avoid, especially since no one would be expecting him to cast magic.

Back in the present, Pel cast a critical eye over Harry’s clothing.

“Ab’s right, lad. I can see flowers trying to burst out of that glamour Ab must have cast on your shirt, and those trousers are…more than a bit unfortunate, let’s say. The sweater deserves no comment.”

“And I’m tired of you wearin’ my only other pair a’ shoes,” Aberforth added. “Every time the shrinkin’ spell fizzes out you trip up and break my dishes!” He gathered some coins from the ancient till. “Take this. Buy things. Bring back receipts. I’ll add it to your tab.”

Harry shrugged and made to leave the pub. It was true that he really needed less attention-getting clothing than the Weasleys had gifted him, but he had absolutely no desire to venture into the rest of the village. His paranoia about discovery and altering the time line had abated a hair, given that he didn’t think anything would happen in the sleepy little dive that would irrevocably destroy the future, but going out into public for the first time stoked the fires of his anxiety into a full blaze. Still, needs must.

“And for Merlin’s sake, make sure that bastard Cordwaine sells you a decent pair of boots at a fair price. He tries to gouge ya, he’ll be hearin’ from me!” Ab yelled as Harry donned the coat Hagrid had given him and tipped him and the regulars a little wave.

Hogsmeade looked exactly as it always had. Thick snow covered the thatched roofs of the buildings and shops that lined the main street. Warm golden glows filtered through windows as a pale December sun struggled to light the day. Enchanted candles hung in the trees that overhung the lane, and wreathes of mistletoe and evergreen graced the doors.

A fair number of villagers were out and about, likely, Harry surmised, so as to avoid the throngs of students that would invade the village during the final Hogsmeade weekend of the term the next day.

He garnered more than a few raised eyebrows and scowls from passerby.

_Ab was right. I definitely need new clothes._

That in mind, he decided to stop at Gladrags first. He’d only been there once, the year before when he had bought a Christmas present for Dobby, but figured they’d have the sort of basic clothing he needed.
He ignored the pang that thinking of Dobby and Hogsmeade weekends with his friends caused.

A little bell above the door piped a few bars of a Christmas carol as he entered the glittering shop. When he moved towards the area of the store he thought he’d need, he passed by racks of socks whose various lurid patterns started whirling, spinning, and greeting him as he approached.

The excitement of the footwear caught the attention of the rather young sales clerk, who was turning the pages of her magazine with a practiced, well-manicured hand. She was quite pretty, Harry observed, but in that overly-perfected, overly-coiffed way. Her smart white and ivory robe set was immaculate, every golden hair tamed and styled. Perhaps he’d spent too long filthy in the woods and around filthiness at the Head. This too clean, too perfect specimen of womanhood made him nervous.

The young woman, whose name placard read ‘Celeste,’ took Harry’s appearance in with a small, disapproving purse of her expertly-painted lips.

“And you would be here for … ?” She drawled.

Harry shrugged sheepishly and looked down at himself. “I really need some new clothes, new robes.”

“Obviously.” The sneer didn’t show on her expressionless face, but was obvious in her tone.

*Does 1976 Snape have a hot blonde sister?*

She sniffed. “Hogwarts students aren’t supposed to be here until tomorrow.”

Harry gave another shrug. “I’m not a Hogwarts student.”

Her eyes narrowed before returning to her magazine. “Out with you,” she said dismissively, gracing him with an absent wave of her hand towards the door.

“Excuse me?”

“Gladrags Wizardwear Group Limited’s policy is not to sell its products to…” she recited in a monotone before faltering a bit, though she still didn’t look up from her reading, “… to, well, people like you.”

Harry was floored. The other time he’d been here he hadn’t looked that much better, clad as he had been in Dudley’s cast-offs with an open school robe over them, but the salesclerk then had practically tripped over herself trying to help him.

*What the hell is going on? People like me?*

“But, but I have gold? See?” He dug into his pocket and brought out some of the coins Ab had lent him.

The young woman sighed. *She’s still not looking at me.* “Gladrags Wizardwear Group Limited is uninterested in your custom, regardless of your fiscal capacity to purchase its products.”

Harry gaped.

The clerk slapped her magazine shut. “Look, kid, it means I can’t sell anything to you, so please just bugger off. I don’t own the store, I just work here, understand?” She finally made eye contact with him, but looked away quickly.
Harry nodded dumbly and walked back to the door.

Meanwhile, the young woman seemed to lose an argument with herself. “Hey, the Fenwicks over at the Jumble don’t mind selling to, well, to anyone. They’ve usually got tons of used clothes there.”

Harry nodded again, but helplessly opened his mouth to ask what the Jumble was and where he could find it.

The girl didn’t give him time to before sighing with exasperation. “All the way down High Street, take a left when it ends, it’s a few blocks over. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you, miss,” Harry replied in a soft voice. There was no point in taking his fury out on her. It wouldn’t do anything.

She shook her head and waved him off before turning and ignoring him utterly.

The piping door bells seemed significantly less merry as he left the store.

Harry sighed as he returned home (home!) to the Head. His excursion had been mostly successful. He’d managed to find some decent, if rather worn clothing at what he discovered was “Jinky Fenwick’s Fabulous Jumble,” a massive mess of a store that seemed to specialize in second-hand everything, so long as it was old, worn, or dirty.

The man behind the counter had kindly allowed him to change into one set of his new clothes, sparing Harry another walk of shame down High Street. His new (but obviously used) slate blue open cloak, dark brown tunic, and dark gray trousers all fit him fairly well, but they nonetheless did not stop the many of the village denizens from casting dark looks his way. Apparently everyone knew that there was something wrong with teenagers who didn’t attend Hogwarts.

His visit to the tidy little shop that proclaimed in sprawling gold letters to be that of “Crispin Cordwaine, Master Cobbler” had not gone so well.

Upon entering, he had immediately been met by the master cobbler himself, a fastidious little man with a mustache so thin that it must have served as model for Barty Crouch Sr. It was more hair than was on the rest of his entire head.

“You must be the old goat’s charity case,” he had proclaimed in a nasal voice, looking down at Harry from behind rimless spectacles.

“Er—” That probably met Ab…

“Run along back to him and remind him that the Cordwaines are a respectable family. We’ll have nothing to do with unfortunates like yourself.”

Harry was not going to leave at that.

“Look, I have gold, I need shoes. There’s not even anyone else in here! Can’t you just—” He stopped abruptly when the man pulled his wand and pointed it straight at him.

Bugger this. Bugger this all so much.

Harry left without another word, barely keeping himself from slamming the door so hard that the pristine glass would break. He remembered Ab’s warnings. Getting pissy, no matter how justified, could well land him in Azkaban.
As he walked into the pub, Pel let out a breath. “Much better,” he muttered.

“Why are you still wearing my shoes?” Ab barked.

“The cobbler wouldn’t sell any to me,” he replied simply.

Ab’s face darkened and he grabbed his winter cloak. “Pel – watch the bar.”

“Hey, I work here! I can do that,” Harry protested.

Ab snorted, doffed a thick fur hat, and was out the door.

With a delighted giggle Pel stepped behind the bar to pull himself and his mates generous pint glasses of Firewhisky.

“Shouldn’t you pay for that?” Harry asked with an arched brow.

Pel smiled devilishly. “Help drinks free.”

_Bullshite. Try selling that one to Ab._

When Ab returned three quarters of an hour later carrying a brand new pair of low-cut cattle leather boots which he unceremoniously handed over to Harry, Pel, Dalcop and the other regulars were several sheets to the wind.

“They pay for all that whiskey?”

Harry shook his head. “Said the help drinks free.”

“Bullshite,” he grumbled over the sound of the drunken men singing a bawdy song about a witch who could change her appearance and form at will. “Ah well, I’ll just add it to your tab, lad.”

“Aw, thash no’ fair ta da boy, Abs …,” Dalcop started.

“…he hasn’t even punished a single Death Eater in, wha, two days now?,” Pel completed dramatically.

“Shaddup, ya no good drunks!” Ab responded and pointed a finger at Harry. “This one’s on you, boy.”

_Goddamnit all so much._

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**20 December, 1976**

It was the day of Harry’s first Hogsmeade weekend since moving in with Aberforth. He wasn’t all that worried about somehow destroying the space time continuum, for today, at least. Ab had observed that only the rare group of seventh years ever ventured into the pub, and Harry had been kept busy cleaning the stables and guest rooms for most of the day anyway.

Goat trotted after him as he swept out the stables, blithely ignoring the attentions of a rapt Silvanus, who settled for preening in front Broma, a much less discerning nanny. Every so often Harry bent over to give Goat a scratch.

It was strange to be here cleaning up dung and hanging out with a goat when his parents – his real, thoroughly not dead, teenage parents – were probably strolling around the village at this very minute,
maybe looking at the same pinkening horizon that he was. He’d long since given up the idea of ever approaching them, but the temptation to catch a glimpse was undeniable.

“Lad!”

Harry scampered up the steps to find a waiting Ab. “Rosie over at the ‘Sticks just Flooed. Kids’ve near drank her outta butterbeer and there’s still three hours before they have to get back to the school. She’s payin’ me almost double base cost for my extra casks. Sure as shit no one here is gonna drink that sugar piss. Quisby’s bringin’ ‘em out back. Load up the cart and drop ‘em off for me.”

Knowing my luck my parents will be there.

Is the universe suicidal? Does it want to be destroyed?

Harry nodded and headed out to ready Ab’s ancient pushcart, all the while trying not to grumble. He hated the stupid contraption. The thing was literally from the Victorian period, shrieked like a banshee, and half the time actually needed to be pushed rather than run off charms. Harry wasn’t the sort to be much concerned with how he appeared to others, but even he had to admit it was impossible to look cool while in the company of that monstrosity.

Quisby helpfully ended his levitation of the kegs the moment they were out the door and sent them crashing to the ground. Sure, they were charmed unbreakable, but the git could have put them on the cart for him, Harry stewed as he dead-lifted each extremely heavy keg.

And so it was that Harry nervously ventured into the Hogsmeade evening, laden with several casks of butterbeer and one deeply embarrassing pushcart. Students streamed past him as fast as they dared on the slick walks, while Harry struggled to keep the laden wagon from getting stuck in the deep narrows between the cobblestones. Every few moments he surreptitiously peered about, unsure whether he was hoping to see one of his parents or hoping not to.

To his surprise, the universe seemed to have gained some sense of self-preservation, for though he spied a few students who looked vaguely familiar – as if they had kids who attended Hogwarts with him – there was nary a Marauder or Lily in sight.

Eventually he maneuvered the pushcart up to the Three Broomsticks and was met by a breathless, young, and eye-poppingly buxom Madame Rosmerta, who was accompanied by several upper year male students. No doubt she’d had no problem convincing them to help her unload the cart.

She was nice enough, he supposed. Sure, she called him “squib,” (at which point the students suddenly found something else to look at), but she didn’t say it in a mean way, she thanked him, and she even took the time to pointedly invade his personal space with her breasts. To his mind, this made her quite the equal opportunity advocate in comparison to many of the other villagers he’d encountered.

Quisby had nothing on Rosmerta, that was for sure.

A few older students with Slytherin scarves glared at him suspiciously on the way home. His wand hand itched for a wand that wasn’t there as they fell into step behind him and kept at his back for a few blocks. Passing by Zonko’s, their interest was diverted by the window display and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The sun had nearly set when he trundled the much lighter pushcart back up the walk to the Head, only to skid to a stop when he realized three girls were blocking the path.

“Absolutely not!,’’ The one’s whose back was turned completely to Harry was saying. “I don’t care
if the Three Broomsticks is out of butterbeer, there’s no way I’m going in there!”

A short blond girl with a feathered, very 1970s haircut and more eyeliner than was strictly necessary stood in profile and made a pleading gesture. “Oh, come on, Lils! I’m freezing, I want a drink, and I’ve always wanted to see inside this place!”

Lils.

_Seriously, universe?_

Harry stood as still as any woodland creature confronted with an apex predator, his mind paralyzed. _Stay? Run? Say something? Fuck, fuck, fuck – that’s my mother!_

Meanwhile the girls’ argument continued. “Marlene,” Lily commanded, “tell her that this is a terrible idea.”

The third girl, apparently ‘Marlene,’ idly twirled a brown curl in her fingers. “Dunno, could be fun.” She brightened. “Hey, they’d probably even serve us Firewhiskey, they wouldn’t care …”

Lily took a calming breath. “Marlene, Vana, I, Am. A. Prefect. I can’t be seen in a place like this!” She lowered her voice to a sharp, deadly serious whisper. “I heard that there are prostitutes here!”

It happened without any conscious decision on Harry’s part.

He laughed. Loudly.

The three girls visibly jumped. Lily and Marlene turned and scowled at him. The blonde, Vana, gave him a speculative once-over.

_Shite. Shite. Shite._

He coughed awkwardly. “I, er, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh like that.”

His mother glared at him, her arms crossed.

“It’s just, uh, it was kind of funny to hear what students think of the Head, that’s all.”

Vana’s eyes grew bold, “Oh, do you work here? That’s cool!” She gave him a smile that seemed to show all her teeth. “I bet you have all sorts of interesting stories about the things that go on inside!”

Harry wasn’t sure what to say to this. _Is she actually flirting with me?_

Lily was staring at him. “You’re young. Why don’t you go to Hogwarts?,” she asked without preamble.

Marlene slapped her lightly on the elbow and hissed, “Lily! You don’t just ask that.”

Harry smiled awkwardly. “Uh, circumstances I guess.”

Lily and the blonde looked confused. The brunette looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Er, anyway, sorry for interrupting, but uh, can you please move so that I can get past?”

Lily jumped, “Oh! Sorry, I guess we are blocking the path.”

With a dismissive gesture silently assuring her that no apology was necessary, he pushed the cart up
the walk as the girls moved out of the way. When he had rounded the corner in the back and was safely out of sight, he listened hard to hear the rest of their conversation.

“Well, that settles that, we are definitely not going in!” Lily declared.

It was like being punched in the stomach.

What?

“What?” Vana echoed Harry’s thoughts. “What was wrong with him? I thought he was kinda interesting, well, in a dangerous sort of way at least…”

Lily scoffed. “Of course you would think that! You always go for the trampy ones. I mean, did you see him? He was filthy, and kinda freaky, just staring at us, and just … just ugh!

What? What? Harry’s heart was gasping.

“You’re hardly one to talk about going for the trampy ones, Lils,” the blonde grumbled.

“Don’t get your heart set on him, Vana,” Marlene muttered quietly. “He’s a teenager, in Hogsmeade, who doesn’t go to Hogwarts. He’s gotta be a squib.”

“Oh!” From Vana’s tone, she no longer considered him interesting in a dangerous sort of way.

“Whatever, forget about him,” Lily proclaimed, ending the argument. “Let’s just go back to school. It’s getting too cold to keep wandering around the village anyway.”

With happy chatter and a swirl of woolen robes the three girls departed.

Meanwhile, Harry had gone numb, more numb than the night Ab had found him in the snow. He robotically stowed the pushcart and entered the back of the inn, descended the stairs to the kitchen, and began gathering dishes to wash.

Filthy.

Freaky.

Just ugh!

Forget about him.

Lily’s thoughtless judgments replayed through his mind on a loop. They were – they were – they were – his mind stuttered along with his heart.

They were crippling.

Forget about him.

I can’t be seen in a place like this.

Filthy.

Freaky.

Oh God. That was my mum. My mum said those things about me.

She … she sounded like …
Harry couldn’t finish the thought, though he knew precisely whom young Lily had sounded like.

She had sounded like Aunt Petunia.

Harry swayed, and put his hands flat on the nearest surface to steady himself.

*That wasn’t my mum,* His inner voice tried to calm him. *My mum is dead, and my dad is dead. Those two other girls are probably also dead, else why did I never hear about them or meet them?*

And then the world went white.

*I never heard about or met Ab either, though.*

His stomach dropped.

*Oh God, he’s probably dead too.*

*They’re all dead, all dead, all dead …*

*Dead empty eyes. All the spares, all gone.*

*Dead empty eyes like Cedric. All the spares, all gone, all killed.*

*But Ron and Hermione, the twins, Neville, Ginny, Oliver, everyone – they’re not dead!*

*No, they’re worse than that,* a cruel voice inside him hissed. *They’re just gone, whispered out of existence. Sure, maybe they’ll be born again, you keep thinking, but you don’t know, do you? No, they’re all just more spares, more bodies behind you.*

The faces of his friends flickered before his eyes so fast he couldn’t catch them. He couldn’t breathe. Ab’s kitchen was gone. The words in his head were becoming disjointed, senseless, awful things with gnashing teeth that bit at him without mercy. *Spares. Filthy. Empty. Freaky. Spares. Dead. Dead. Gone.*

Shouts dimly reached his ears, but the pounding of *Dead – Dead – Gone* drowned them out. Hands on his arms, hands on his shoulders, hands on the his face, hands on the back of his head, tipping it back. Liquid in his mouth. Down, down his throat. *Filthy – Empty – Freaky – Spares.*

Briefly, steel blue eyes appeared before him. *Ab.*

*No, Ab was dead. Wasn’t he?*

He fought for control of his mouth and managed to choke out, “Ab? You’re not a spare, are you?” Darkness was cocooning him. *Dammit, this is important!* “Please Ab! *Please,* don’t be a spare!” He was falling. “No more spares … I can’t …”

Aberforth stared at the boy sprawled unconscious, half in his lap, half on his kitchen floor, for long moments before he met Peloother’s eyes. They were, for once, serious and sharp.

“What the fuck was that, Ab?”

The old bartender had come down to pick up the money from Rosmerta not long after he had heard the boy enter through the back door. When he entered the kitchen, he knew something was wrong.

The boy was standing absolutely still, his hands flat on top the stove, the smell of searing flesh
slowly filling the cramped room. His skin was being burned off, but the boy didn’t move, didn’t utter a sound, at least until Ab had knocked his hands away and whirled him around.

The boy’s eyes – *his impossibly young, foolish eyes* – were unblinking and dilated. The smallest of whimpers escaped his lips.

“QUISB – aw fuck it – PEL! Peloother! Get your drunk arse down here NOW!” Ab had bellowed over his shoulder. He eased Harry and himself to the floor.

A clamor down the stairs, a bump, and a muffled curse announced Pel’s arrival.

Ab didn’t wait for questions. “Calming draught, Pain draught, Burn paste. Top left cupboard on that wall,” he barked to Pel, who immediately began rummaging in Ab’s stock of healing supplies “Two a’ each potion. He’s a squib, he’ll need more than us.”

“Dead, dead, gone …” Both men paused and looked at the boy who had started mumbling, his eyes still staring, unseeing.

“Find ‘em now!” Ab barked at Pel. “Lad? Lad, can you hear me?”

The boy whimpered again. “Filthy, empty, freaky, spares …” His hands reached out for something.

“No, lad! You’re hurt bloody bad! Don’t move your hands,” Ab shifted the boy half into his lap and tried to immobilize the boy’s shoulders with is own arms.

Pel finally rushed over with the requested potions. He uncorked and handed Ab two Calming Draughts first. Aberforth unceremoniously tilted the boy’s head back and dumped them down his throat in quick succession. The boy sputtered something fierce, but kept them down.

As the boy’s eyes slowly contracted, he finally looked at Ab with a haunted expression. “Ab? You’re not a spare, are you?”

Pel handed him the first Pain potion, but the boy grabbed his wrist, oblivious to the searing pain that had to be coursing through his hands. “Please Ab! *Please*, don’t be a spare!”

Aberforth didn’t know what the *fuck* that meant, but tried to calm the boy. “I’m not a ruddy spare, Harry!” He tipped the potion into the boy’s gasping mouth.

“No more spares … I can’t …” Green eyes closed.

And so here he was, sitting with a passed out teenager in his lap, looking into the grave eyes of Peloother Pepst.

“What the *fuck* was that, Ab?”

Aberforth considered the boy. “Panic attack or some such thing, I’m guessin’. When I came down he had his hands on the stove. He didn’t even notice the burns. Speakin’ of – pass that paste over. And grab me some of the cotton bandaging that’s up in the cupboard.”

Pel complied and returned, his eyes speculative. As he passed over the bandaging, he seemed to come to a decision. “Ab, I like the lad, I truly do. But what do you really know about him? I mean this … this isn’t normal.”

Ab grunted as he began applying a thick layer of paste. “What do I know?” He was quiet for a few moments. “I know he spent months – cold months – livin’ alone in the forest, fendin’ for himself and
askin’ no one for help. I know he keeps his head down an’ does his job without much lip. I know he can look a man in the eye and tell the truth. I know he’s … a decent enough lad, proud even though he has no name that he’ll claim or no name that’ll claim him.” He paused and scooped up more burn paste for Harry’s other hand. “And I know he can see thestrals. An’ that that traitorous bint Amaltheia loves him best. That’s what I know.”

Pel nodded slowly and began bandaging the hand Ab had finished working on. Eventually both men completed their ministrations and Ab lifted Harry into his arms. “I’ll get him to his bed. Do me a favor and tell Quisby to man the pub until I come up. Don’t tell him about this!Fuck, don’t tell anyone about this. An’ get Dung to discreetly ask ‘round the village to see if somethin’ happened to the boy out there.”

Pel departed, and Ab heaved Harry towards the stable. As he laid him down on his straw bed, he brushed the hair out of the boy’s eyes and took a long look at the strange, deep scar that marred his forehead. He’d noticed it now and then, peeking through his fringe, but this was his first opportunity to really inspect it. Thing’s definitely not natural. Eventually shaking his head, Ab tucked the boy in and said softly to himself as he closed the stable door “And I know that those potions shouldn’t have worked nearly that quickly on him.”

21 December, 1976

Harry woke early the next morning as the black sky was just beginning to blush with blue. Goat was cuddled up against him, snoring softly, her mouth working even in her sleep. He was shocked when he looked over her and spied Ab sleeping on the next hay bed. He moved slowly to grab his glasses only to realize both his hands were thick mitts of bandages.

Hazy memories of the previous evening slammed into him. He had seriously lost it, somehow gotten hurt, and Ab apparently had taken care of him. Cedric’s face suddenly swam before his vision. The dead. I was worried about the dead.

I was scared that Ab was dead in the future.

The rest was just unformed blurs of deep anxiety. All, that is, except for his mother.

He had met his mother and she hadn’t thought much of him. Filthy, freaky, her words returned and cut into him, but strangely without the biting power they had wielded the night before. Harry closed his eyes and thought hard not about his mother, really, but about Lily Evans.

What she said had been … mean. But, he reflected now that he calmed down, it hadn’t exactly been mean-spirited. Her words hurt him, hurt him to the bone, that was true, yet they were really not meant to hurt him. They were …

Thoughtless.

That’s it, that’s right. They were the thoughtless words of someone who didn’t know the power she had over me. They were just … the thoughtless words of a sixteen year old schoolgirl. A girl who, so far as I know, has had a pretty decent, happy, suburban life so far. Lily Evans doesn’t know what it means to be truly scared, or locked up, or alone, or hungry or any of that. She just doesn’t understand.

And, he realized with a flash of clarity, he absolutely didn’t want her to understand. He wished she thought differently of him, but for her to do so would mean she would have to suffer some, to be alone or hungry or whatever, and he didn’t want her to have to experience those things.
Besides, how different really was her reaction than, say, Hermione’s would have been? Hermione’s probably experienced more, but I could see some of those things coming out of her mouth. It’s not to do with lack of compassion or intelligence. It’s just thoughtlessness.

My mum was a thoughtless kid once.

It was an odd realization.

He knew, intellectually, that he venerated the memory of his parents that he had created, and that such idealization could not really ever have been accurate. Hell, my first successful patronus memory was a fictional conversation with my perfect imaginary version of my parents!

But now he had tangible proof that his parents were real people, truly human. And real people can be mean, or thoughtless, or say things that hurt those they may not wish to hurt. Hell, just look at Ron last year. Just because she sounded a bit like Petunia didn’t mean that Lily would have hated him. It didn’t mean that Lily Evans had been a bad person.

A sense of calm slowly washed over him.

I can live with this.

As for the rest of the anxieties that had swarmed him the night before, he decided there was little he could actually do, and that he wouldn’t blame himself too much.

I’ve been pushing so hard to survive since the day I came back that I suppose it had to sink in sometime. For fuck’s sake, I’ve been tortured by a Dark Lord, watched Cedric die, dealt with the Dursleys, and then got Kissed by a Dementor, time traveled, and lived in the Forbidden Forest until I almost froze to death.

Maybe I deserve a pass just this once.

He turned his attention to Goat, who had woken and was gazing at him with bleary eyes and a mildly annoyed expression.

“I’m sorry to wake you up,” he said softly as he stroked her belly.

She shook him off and turned over, sitting up on her knees so that she could bring her face to his. Goat regarded him for a moment, passed gas, and then tilted her head to begin eating his hair.

“Good talk, Goat.”

He looked around at the other sleeping goats, and his eyes came to rest on Ab. He stayed with me. The whole night. A warm feeling like that of chocolate after a Dementor attack rushed through him, and he smiled slightly.

“Well, I’m bloody thrilled one of us is having a good mornin’,” Ab growled without opening his eyes. He sighed dramatically and finally sat up, casting a weather eye on Harry.

“Last night was ugly. You had a panic attack or whatnot. You had your hands on the stove, burnin’ the skin clean off, and you didn’t notice. You weren’t all right, lad.” The words were blunt, Ab’s voice flat.

Harry looked at his bandaged hands. “No. No, I suppose I wasn’t. But I’m much better now.” He rushed on. “And thank you, Ab, for taking care of me. Again. And I’m sorry for the trouble and all that. I really am.”
Ab yawned, but looked at Harry with steady eyes. “I ain’t gonna pry about what had you in such a state. Dung Fletcher checked around and no one saw you attacked, that right?” Harry nodded. “Like I said, I ain’t gonna pry.”

“But?” Harry prompted.

“But,” Ab returned, “I gotta ask you, is there anythin’ you want to tell me Harry?”

Harry hadn’t lied to Aberforth yet. Sure, he’d misled him since the moment they met, and he didn’t correct Ab’s wrong impressions, and he certainly didn’t tell him important things, but he hadn’t outright lied to the man. (*)

He didn’t want to start now.

“Yes. Yes there is.”

“But?” Ab prompted dryly.

“But I’m not going to.” Ab began to protest, but Harry silenced him with his expression. “I don’t want to lie to you. Yes, there are things I really, really wish I could tell you. I can’t even describe how much I want to tell you. But I can’t.”

Ab stood up. “If you’ve been cursed with some sort of secrecy spell, I can take care a’”

“No.” Harry motioned for Ab to sit back down. “No, nothing like that. I can’t tell you because …

… it might lead to the complete breakdown of the space-time continuum …

“… because there are things I know that could get people hurt, really hurt. Could get people killed. Yeah, I want to tell you, but that’s ‘cause it’ll make me feel better. It’d be pretty selfish of me to give up their, well, everything, for my own peace of mind. It’d be easy, but wrong.” Harry picked at the straw of his bed before returning Ab’s gaze. “So no, I’m not going to say anything. And that’s all I’ll say about it.”

Ab’s face was thunderous, and Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

“I know that’s a shit explanation after … whatever happened last night. I – ”, A lump had formed in his throat, “I understand if you want me to go. I’m sorry about the trouble. I can go and find work somewhere else and I promise I’ll repay my debt to you that way.”

Ab stood and walked to the door. Harry’s heart began breaking.

“Go and grab the Prophet before breakfast. Heard that bastard of a Minister, Minchum, is implementing ‘new policies’ guaranteed to win the war. Let’s make some eggs and go over that waffle. We can try to figure out how many ways he’s a fuckin’ idiot.”

Everything is okay.

“Sure Ab, sounds good.”

25 December, 1976

To Harry’s surprise, Christmas day at the Head saw him the busiest he’d yet been since coming to live there. He had expected the pub to close or, if open, to be deserted. Two days before Christmas, however, Ab began receiving deliveries of more and better quality food than normal, though of
course the latter was hardly too difficult to achieve. Aberforth explained that it was one of the Head’s
most profitable days of the year, as just about everyone who regularly came to the pub came for
Christmas, plus tons of others. Still puzzled by that, Harry got to work prepping what was to be a
fairly extravagant feast, by the exceptionally low standards of the Hog’s Head, that is.

By noon of Christmas day, the pub was positively bustling, and nearly everyone was ordering the
ample but simple meals that Ab, Harry, and, when it suited him, Quisby had prepared.

The patrons were a study in the great variety of social dregs offered by the British wizarding world.
Hags, drunks, prostitutes, scoundrels, thieves, what Harry was fairly sure were a few vampires and
werewolves (the two groups kept well apart from each other), and sundry other magical lowlifes
each found a spot for themselves at the tables, though the bar was reserved for those few regular
fools that Ab particularly didn’t hate as much.

Harry himself had been surprised that Ab permitted him to be in the pub given that most of the day’s
patrons seemed the sort to frequent the Head long after Harry’s nine p.m. curfew. Ab explained that
Christmas day was a truce day (‘It’s called Trêve de Noël, you ignorant pleb,’ Peloother piped in), a
day on which a traditional ceasefire was observed. ‘They’re ignorant, stupid, immoral fucks, this lot
is, but even they won’t arse up the Christmas truce,’ Ab remarked as he filled a tray with glasses of
Berry Ocky Rot for a group of crones in the corner.

Come to think of it, I don’t believe anyone’s ever tried to kill me on Christmas either. Huh.

As Ab stalked off to deliver the sickly-sweet smelling drinks, Harry shook his head. ‘But I don’t get
it. It’s Christmas! Why are all these people here of all places?’ he asked the regulars at the bar, who
seemed incomplete without Dalcop’s perpetual presence. Apparently, the legendary Vera had
managed to tether him to his house for the day.

Nappy Clank scoffed and Wigol Palter, as was his wont, muttered something completely
incomprehensible (Harry still hadn’t figured out if the man talked like that because he was drunk or
just because). Martial Sorner had fallen asleep in the Christmas pudding he had scammed off Quisby
and so therefore was no help. Pel sighed. ‘Why are you here, lad?’

Harry blinked. ‘I work here.’

Pel rolled his eyes. ‘Well, why do you work here?’

‘I owe Ab …’

‘Merlin’s sake, why do you owe Ab?’

Harry bit his lip. ‘Well, because he saved me and gave me a place to stay when –’ he broke off.

Pel raised an eyebrow. ‘Aye, when you had no place else to go.’ He sighed and looked hard at
Harry. ‘Where else would you be today, if you weren’t here?’ When Harry looked at his shoes, Pel
made a sweeping gesture around the pub. ‘No need for shame, same is true of all of us, even if some
won’t admit it. We’re here because it’s Christmas, lad, and no one likes to be alone on Christmas, no
matter how dark a soul one might have.’ He took a long swig of his Hog’s Head brew. ‘Head’s the
only place open in all of Britain today. Everywhere in Diagon, everywhere in Knockturn’s all
shuttered up. ‘Sticks is closed, everywhere in Cardiff and around the countryside, all closed. I think
the Salty Kappa o’er in Cork may be open, but that’s it. So we all come here.’

Harry nodded thoughtfully, his eyes distant.

His ruminations were rudely interrupted when an American vampire by the fireplace began vomiting
up a fountain of bright neon blue nastiness.

As the majority of the patrons roared in laughter and a few of the more delicate souls made sounds of disgust, Aberforth howled at the young vampire over the din of the crowd, “Ruddy Muggle Yanks! You worthless pieces of shit get turned and your bloody brains die with the rest of ya! What the ever-living-fuck made you think that you could drink from a fuckin’ Cornish **pixie**?”

*Ah, Harry concluded, he must have tried to eat the Christmas tree decorations.*

The Head’s tree was truly a sad little thing. Harry was convinced Ab had found it uprooted and half dead. The only ornaments upon it were a handful of old goat horns Ab had attached to little brass chains and an upturned copper beer tankard for a star. A few days earlier Harry had discovered a nest of Cornish pixies in the curtains of one of the guestrooms, which Ab had immobilized, somehow charmed to glow, and strung up as macabre tree lights.

It was the perfect tree for the Head.

As Ab continued to berate the American muggle-turned-vampire, the barroom hooted and hollered. “Boy!” *Shite, now Ab’s attention is on me.* “Get this puke cleaned up!”

Harry wasn’t one to complain, really he wasn’t, but this was a bit much. “Seriously, Ab, can’t you just vanish it?”

“Course I can!”

*Oh thank God.*

“Now get it cleaned up!”

The raucous laughter of the Head’s patrons echoed through the pub. It was its own sort of Christmas carol, Harry mused, as he sighed and went to grab a mop.

Sometime after midnight Harry sat in an overstuffed chair near the crackling fireplace and looked at the near-deserted Head. About an hour before Ab had abruptly sent the swaying, retching throngs to their … wherever they went when they weren’t at the Head. Those too drunk to Floo, Apparate, or otherwise slink away had been summarily dumped in heaps in the guest rooms above, each being charged for single use of the room, regardless of how many occupants there were.

A privileged few had been allowed to remain in the pub. Pel and Dalcop – who had joyously appeared that evening after sneaking away while Vera fought with her mother – were both currently passed out over an unfinished game of wizard chess. Dalcop’s remaining pieces had taken the high ground by ascending up the man’s back as he slumped over. Said pieces now were launching chicken bones and other pub detritus at Pel’s black pieces, which had fortified a position under his chair and were sending out search parties to recruit additional forces.

One crone, her white hair streaked with purple and her entire body covered with a black lace veil, had been allowed to continue nursing her Corpse Reviver in the far corner. Harry had no idea who she was, but Ab apparently had a bit of a soft spot for her.

Quisby had smuggled a sharp-faced, scantily dressed young person past Ab’s watchful eye during the forced exodus, and was currently doing his best to put on the charm at a table near the door. Harry smothered a smile. The weedy bartender had been bragging that he was sure to pull her, but Harry had an inkling that the girl was more interested in the access to free drinks than Quisby
Meanwhile, Ab had disappeared up the stairs. He grunted some unintelligible excuse, but Harry was certain he could be found in the sitting room reading to Ariana. He let the old man be.

It had been a weird Christmas. To think, a year ago he’d been ascending to the Gryffindor dorms after slouching his way through his first ball, and now he was in the past and working at the shadiest dive in the British wizarding world.

It was a weird Christmas, he thought, reviewing the antics of the day (and who would’ve thought he’d get his first proper grope from a Welsh vampire who went by the unlikely moniker ‘Panty Wacco’?), but it was a good one. (*)

There was a knock on the pub door.

“We’re closed!” Harry and Quisby shouted as one. “Clxsddsdn,” Wigol Palter iterated from the corner where he was dozing.

“It’s jus’ me, Harry! Can I come in for a mo’?,” came the unmistakable voice of Rubeus Hagrid. Quisby scowled and went back to his flirting as Harry grinned and bounded across the room to unbar the great oak door.

“Hagrid! It’s great to see you!”, he beamed.

Hagrid grinned back. “Aw, go on, Harry. Anyhow, I’m sorry that I ain’t been by ter check on ya ’fore now. Christmas at Hogwarts is a busy time, a busy time indeed! I jus’ wanted to stop in an’ wish ye a Happy Christmas.”

“That’s really kind of you, Hagrid … Sure you didn’t come by because you hoped for a pint as well?” Harry asked shrewdly.

Hagrid twirled his fingers together and looked a bit apologetic. “Well, wouldn’t say no ta one! The kids at Hogwarts are grea’ a’ course, but the little buggers kin be a bit much durin’ the holidays, don’t ye know.”

With a laugh, Harry invited him in.

Several minutes later found the two of them sitting companionably by the fire. “Well, I was goin’ ter see if ye wanted to play some chess but …” Hagrid faltered and turned an eye to the continuing battle being waged atop the unconscious barflies. It was currently a deadlock, but neither side seemed interested in a détente. “Ya got Explodin’ Snap, maybe?”

Harry wandered over and began rummaging through the old chest in the corner that housed the assortment of odds and ends that had collected in the pub over the years. “… Nope … oh, but it looks like we have Scrabble, it’s a muggle game –”

“A course I know Scrabble!” Hagrid boomed to Harry’s shock. “Set ‘er up.”

As Harry unpacked the board and tiles, he couldn’t help but feel a bit bad for the groundskeeper. Harry was no Hermione, but he was pretty sure that he had a much better vocabulary than Hagrid did. Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter as long as we have fun.

Not five minutes later Harry realized he was in serious trouble.

“Flaagrah cannot be a word, Hagrid.”
“Sure is! That’s a giant plant from the Andes, that is. Has razor sharp leaves and kin spit acid. I’ve always wanted one for me garden,” the half-giant confessed.

Harry was rather proud of hitting a double word score with bandits until Hagrid hooked his ‘t’ to make a triple word score with the unlikely fext.

“Fext? Fext? No way.”

“Look her up, if ya want.”

Harry thumbed through the dog-eared dictionary he had found behind the bar.

“Goddammit.”

Hagrid nodded gravely. “Gotta be wary of them fexts, Harry. Nasty buggers. Like inferii, see, ‘cept fire doesn’t harm ‘em. Have to shoot glass at ‘em instead. Caused a whole lotta trouble on the continent a couple a’ centuries ago.”

Harry didn’t know what inferii were, but if Hagrid didn’t think they were adorable, that was saying something.

At Harry’s blank look, Hagrid explained. “Can’t believe ye ain’t heard of these, Harry! Skvaders are little Swedish critters. Half hare, half grouse. Good in a stew, they are.”

With a flourish Harry finished placing tiles to spell patronus. Triple letter score on the P!

Hagrid spelled ijiraq and earned 68 points.

Bugger it.

“Do I want to know what an ijiraq is?,” he sighed.

Ab, returning from his sojourn upstairs, chuckled. “Thought you had more brains than to play that ruddy muggle game with him,” he said, gesturing to Hagrid. “Tell me you didn’t bet him any money. You’ll be living here an’ payin’ me off until you’re thirty.”

Hagrid laughed and pulled a deep drink of his pint.

“Qiqirn? Really? Really? Oh, fuck this,” Harry moaned into his hands as Hagrid made his final move.

“That’ll be another, oh, I’m rubbish with numbers, ‘bout 108 points?” Hagrid asked innocently, counting on his fingers. “An’ ye should know about qiqirns, Harry. That’s a bald ghostly hound that’s only got hair on a few a’ its parts—ears and mouth, mostly. Terrifying buggers, but all ye need ta do ter calm ‘em or drive ‘em away is ta say their names. Don’t need no magic t’all.”

“And how do you know their names?”
Hagrid blinked. “Well, I reckon tha’ could be a problem.”

Harry checked the final score. 612 to 103.

He was never playing Scrabble with Hagrid again.

“Well, I’m for bed, and it ain’t a short walk back ta the grounds,” Hagrid said and stood up. “But wait a mo’, Harry, I got ye a gift, see.” He rummaged in the pockets of his coat and finally brought out a small smushed parcel wrapped in crinkled red tissue.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Thank you, Hagrid! You didn’t have to do that. I, er – didn’t get you anything. I’m really sorry.”

Hagrid waved it off and Harry carefully opened the rumpled present. Inside was a small brown sack on a leather thong.

“It’s a mokeskin pouch, see? Ye kin hide anythin’ in there an’ no one but you kin get it out.”

Aberforth quirked an eyebrow. “That’s a rare gift, there, lad.”

“Wow, thanks Hagrid! It’s really great!” Harry already was planning to deposit his slingshot and target-spelled stones in it. He’d been toying with the idea of charming them to hit Death Eaters whenever he got back to his cave and his wand. Just in case, of course. It also occurred to him that it’d be a great place for the flower Ariana had given him. He’d taken to carrying it in the inside pocket of his robes, but this would be much safer.

Hagrid eventually departed after many blushed “don’t mention its.” As Harry forced a truce between the chess pieces and covered Pel and Dalcop with blankets, Ab grabbed his arm and cleared his throat.

“Got you somethin’ as well.” From behind the bar he pulled out a small flat box and a larger square one wrapped in old copies of the *Daily Prophet*. Harry gaped at him and opened up the square box. Inside were the few possession of his that he hadn’t had on him when Ab had found him in the snow. The Ron and Hermione chess pieces. A blanket and a few odds and ends Hagrid had left for him. The flute. His purple Knight Bus toothbrush. His wand was the only thing missing from the collection, much to his relief.

“S’pose these shouldn’t count as a gift. They’re already yours, but I thought you might be missin’ things so I apparated over to your cave and grabbed what I saw.” Harry smiled broadly at him and nodded.

He opened the other package, and stared down at an efficient-looking silver dagger with a simple but polished wooden hilt. One side of the double-edged blade featured a nasty, dangerous hook that pointed back towards the hilt. Next to the dagger was a sheath that had obviously been custom-made for it. The simple, oiled brown leather was reinforced with silver and had two straps so that he could attach it to his forearm or perhaps his leg. There was also a loop at the top of the first strap and a small conical sheath attached to the bottom strap. *That must be for a wand*. On closer inspection, he found delicately formed bumblebees engraved into the leather.

Harry looked up at Ab, his eyes wide. The old man seemed grave. “You need a weapon, lad. You’re livin’ in a world that don’t want the likes of you, and this war’ll only get worse.” He paused. “Belonged to my da’ once. It ain’t fancy, but I expect it’ll do the job. Like the pouch from the oaf, the sheath is charmed so that no one can take it or the knife off you, with magic or by hand, specially if you keep it strapped to your arm.” He levelled a stern gaze at Harry. “Which you will.”
Fingers tracing the course of the blade gently, Harry nodded. “This – this is an incredible gift, Ab. But if it belonged to your father I can’t –”

“Oh shut up and strap it on. It’s just been sitting in a trunk since last bloody century, an’ it’s mine to give to who I will.”

“Thank you,” Harry said softly, rolling up his sleeve. Ab helped him strap the sheath to his right arm.

“There’s another spell on the dagger, but you got to practice it, I mean it. You can flick your wrist or hand and the dagger’ll immediately slip into your palm. Same’s true of it if you kept a wand there, but, well.”

“Thank you,” Harry repeated. “I’ll practice it, I promise.”

Ab shook his head. “Bah, go on to bed. It’s late and we’ll have a hell of a day cleaning tomorrow.”

“Wait!” Harry cried, remembering. “I actually got you something as well! I can’t believe I almost forgot!” He sprinted down to the stable and grabbed the bundle wrapped in his old Billywigs shirt.

Ab snorted at the ersatz wrapping and then gazed down at the small wooden figurine that Harry had obviously hand-carved for him. The pine goat was more delicate and a bit better than the dragon he had made for Hagrid, though the tail was awkward. Harry was especially proud of the rough statue’s expression and tilt of her ears. It was obviously supposed to be Goat.

“Not bad, not bad at all. That’s my Amaltheia,” Ab said slowly, his eyes soft.

“Goat,” Harry couldn’t stop himself from correcting.

Aberforth glared. “Off with you! And Harry?” he added, “don’t be killin’ people in my pub with that knife. You need to kill somebody, you do it outside, got it?”

Harry grinned. “No killing inside, I got it.”

*It had been a good, if weird, Christmas.*

Chapter End Notes

(*) Harry has forgotten that the first time he met Ab in Chapter 2 he did lie (about not having a wand).

(*) Pant-y-Wacco is actually a welsh toponym. It is an extremely small village in northern Wales, which translates to the disappointingly banal “hollow of the wake.”

Thank you again for reading/bookmarking/subscribing to The Second String. And thanks especially to those who leave comments.
26 December, 1976

Ab hadn’t been wrong that Harry would need his sleep to face Boxing Day. The Head was wrecked beyond anything he had ever seen before. The mountains of dishes were the least of his problems. Luckily, Quisby and Ab were using magic to straighten the pub, which now only boasted four unbroken chairs and a few square feet that weren’t covered in spilled food, drink, and mystery substances. No, it was the guest rooms that frankly terrified the boy. Ab had kicked out the heaps of hung-over patrons earlier that morning, and set Harry to work on cleaning them.

Nothing Snape had ever had him scrape, scour, or chisel off a cauldron came close to the horrors he found within. Even Ab had looked at him with pity when he poked his head and watched as Harry worked futilely on Room 4. He left quickly, muttering that something called Fiendfyre might be the only option.

It was thus a great relief when Aberforth finally barked at him to go and muck out the stables late in the afternoon. Gratefully leaving the still horrific Room 4, Harry smiled ruefully as he realized he was happily going to clean up goat shit.

He entered the large room he shared with the goats and stopped short.

Clad in eye-watering red robes emblazoned with gold cardboard boxes that flew on silver wings in a hyper ballet across the fabric, Albus Dumbledore stood in the middle of the stable – next to my bed – attempting to pet Goat. She seemed supremely uninterested in his overtures and trotted over to Harry immediately.

The headmaster straightened his back and brushed his robes before favoring Harry with a familiar twinkle of his blue eyes. “Ah, hello there, my boy! I couldn’t resist stopping to greet the goats before going in.”

Goat eyed him with practiced disdain.

*Shite. I wanted to avoid this! Oh God, what if he recognizes me as a Potter? What if he remembers me in the future? What do I do?!*

*Calm down. Don’t freak out. Hagrid said he didn’t care much about what you’re doing. This is nothing. It’s nothing!*

The frantic beating of his heart begged to differ.

“Hello, headmaster,” Harry said politely, rather impressed with himself for keeping his voice fairly even. “Are you here to see Ab?”

Dumbledore smiled, and for a moment nothing had changed. Harry wasn’t a stranger lost in the past,
but was just enjoying another conversation with his childhood hero. “Ah, yes, my boy. I had intended to stop in yesterday, of course, but alas, my duties at the school prevented any personal holiday celebrations.”

Harry nearly snorted at the thought of Albus Dumbledore in the company of yesterday’s debauched throng. “Well, he’s just up in the pub …” Harry trailed off, as the headmaster seemed to have no inclination to leave the room. My bedroom, his mind supplied. Having the aged hero of the wizarding world in one’s bedroom, Harry decided, was a strange thing.

With a noncommittal hum Dumbledore began meandering about the room, inspecting the nooks and crannies with all the interest of a foreign tourist. But all that’s here is hay, really. What’s so fascinating?

“Perhaps before I do that you and I can get to know each other a bit better? I admit, I’m curious about the new addition to my brother’s household!” No, no, no. Bad idea, sir. With that, Dumbledore sat himself elegantly down on Harry’s bed and with an outstretched hand invited Harry to make himself comfortable on Goat’s bed.

Rather awkwardly perched on the straw and looking at the headmaster sitting benignly on his own bed, Harry realized he had no idea what to say.

“So, my boy, you’ve been in the area for some time now. I dare say your family must by worried about you.”

The alarm bells in Harry’s head sounded even more loudly. Dumbledore is smarter than I am. I have to not give him anything with my answers, unless I want to just throw it all in now and admit the truth. Looking at Dumbledore out of the corner of his eye, Harry realized that he didn’t want to admit the truth, and not just because he didn’t quite trust a Dumbledore who didn’t know him … he just trusted Ab more.

And it struck him that he really wasn’t ready to leave the Hog’s Head.

He cleared his throat and gave the headmaster what he hoped came off as a sad smile. “I’m not missed, sir.”

“Well, I’d appreciate knowing who your family are, child. At the very least I can contact them and let them know that you are safe.” His smile turned reassuring. “I’ll be sure to explain your situation to them thoroughly, have no fear.” He paused and then continued delicately, “If they are, in fact, ah, uninterested in being updated on your well-being, I’ll be sure not to communicate with them about you again, of course.”

Harry focused his on a point just past Dumbledore’s head. If he looked into those eyes, he’d crack open and spill every secret he had because, after all, this was Dumbledore. There was nothing he could really say to the headmaster’s statement, so he simply grimaced a bit apologetically and shook his head slightly.

The seconds stretched into minutes as the most uncomfortable silence Harry had ever experienced thickened in the room.

He thinks I can’t take this, and that I’ll eventually cave and say something! A sudden lick of angry fire shot through Harry, surprising him utterly. But the irritated flame burned on despite his own shock. Harry knew that this man had known that a homeless boy had been living in the forest for months, yet he had done nothing about it. Now he waltzed in like some genial benefactor who’d fix all Harry’s (admittedly fictious) family problems with a few words?
Finally, Dumbledore broke the silence. “Ah well, a matter for another day, perhaps. So, how do you
find living at the Hog’s Head? Quite the colorful place, yes?”

“Yes sir. I, uh, I like it a lot here. It’s the best home I’ve ever had.” Harry was taken aback when he
realized that he didn’t believe any of this response was a lie.

“Wonderful! I’m happy to hear my brother has found such a devoted employee. Of course, I’m sure
he takes care to protect you from some of the, shall we say, less savory characters. Indeed, such a
place as this could be considered by some a less than ideal environment in which to raise a young
man.”

Harry went over the headmaster’s words to confirm that there wasn’t a question in any of that. _Nope,
no questions._ He opted to grin a bit more broadly at the headmaster as though pleased he appreciated
the care that Ab had given him. Inside he was becoming more and more hacked off.

_It sounds like he’s constructing an argument on why I shouldn’t live here. What the hell is he playing
at? There’s a reason behind this conversation, but I have no clue what it is!_

_But._

_But he doesn’t suspect anything about what or who I actually am._

_I think._

“Excellent,” Dumbledore beamed serenely from behind his half-moon spectacles. “I was concerned,
I must admit. We’re a world at war, and a place such as this will see more than its fair share of
conflict.”

_Enough. Continuing this conversation can only cause problems._

Harry gave a neutral hum. “Very true, sir.” He suddenly perked up. “I’m so sorry, I’ve just realized
I’ve not offered you any refreshment! Please allow me to show you to your brother and I’ll make a
tea tray for the two of you.” With an ingratiating smile, Harry turned and left the stables for the pub.
He did not turn back, but creaks of the floorboards assured him that Dumbledore was following.

Ab’s eyes narrowed when Harry entered the pub, the headmaster in tow. Before he could say
anything, the old bartender was crossing the room in his enormous, angry stride. He grabbed Harry
by the shoulder but kept his glare directed at the man who stood behind him. “Boy. Get to work in
the kitchen _immediately._”

Harry stiffened at the code word but didn’t hesitate to comply. _Things are happening here that I do
not understand._ “Yes, Ab.” He tilted the headmaster a quick but polite nod as he turned to leave.
“Sir.”

After Harry had securely shut the kitchen door behind him and felt the wards descend, he looked
around, feeling a little lost. The dishes were all done, he’d already gotten the kitchen as clean as he
could get it earlier that day, and the stew for dinner was cheerfully simmering on the stove. There
really wasn’t anything for him to do in here.

He idly wondered what Ab could be so angry with the headmaster about, or why he would think it
necessary to ensconce Harry in the makeshift safe room, but he doubted that Ab would confirm or
deny any of his theories. Dwelling too much on it seemed a pointless exercise.

_I hope I’m not stuck in here all day._
With a sigh, he settled at the corner table and decided to practice his wandless, silent *Accio*, since no one was about and he’d hear anyone on the stairs before they could catch him. He’d improved a little in the last few weeks. Now about half the time the object he summoned came to him, provided it was small enough. Anything heavier than a book tended to wobble uncertainly mid-course, if it moved at all, and drop to the ground. Apparently, it wasn’t all just clearing his mind. Mass mattered as well, at least for the summoning spell.

Intent on his task, he didn’t notice the small movements in the corner at first. When he narrowly avoided letting a summoned pan clatter onto the stone floor, a flash of blue and yellow drew his eye. He cautiously approached the painting that had hosted the unexpected burst of color in the dull gray kitchen. It was quite tiny, no larger than a small book. He’d inspected it some weeks ago, before dismissing its subject – a cramped sitting room done with cheap looking furniture and accessories that seemed like they belonged to the 1930s or 1940s – as uninteresting.

It was no longer uninteresting, for now Ariana sat perched in the wine-colored faux leather chair in the painting’s foreground, waving her hands energetically at him.

*Oh God. She saw me. She must have seen me doing magic!*

“Ariana, look, I can explain! I know you saw –”

The girl rolled her eyes and made an impatient gesture that Harry easily interrupted as *Shut up Harry*.

He shut up, nerves buzzing.

She turned to the painted side table, upon which sat a hulking old-fashioned radio, and began fiddling with the dial. At first all Harry could hear was static, but then Quisby’s unmistakable voice cut through the silence. He was clearly speaking through the Floo and ordering a case of Simison Steaming Stout from a distributor. Harry’s mouth dropped open. Ariana tipped him a wink and turned the dial again.

“– vomit on their front walk?! Such a disgrace!” The cultured tones of an unknown woman filled the room. *She must be outside near the front door,* Harry realized.

*Holy shit.*

*Holy shit!*

*The Head is wired!*

*Oh, this is brilliant.*

Ariana turned the dial again. It was all static for a few moments – *maybe those are the guest rooms? They’re all empty now* – before Aberforth’s furious voice boomed out, startling both Harry and the painted girl.

“– to the ruddy point! I ain’t got all day to listen to your waffle!”

Someone heaved a heavy, dramatic sigh. “I sincerely doubt it’s in the boy’s best interest to remain with you,” came the grave tones of the headmaster.

Harry looked at Ariana, his eyes wide. She regarded him sadly and pointed at the radio. *Keep listening.*

After a pause, Ab said in a dangerously low voice, “Fuck you, Albus.”
“You don’t want to hear it, but you know that I am correct. This place simply isn’t safe!”

“I keep my charges safe, you sanctimonious bastard! Can you say the same for yours?” Ab added with a sneer.

“The current and past conditions of Hogwarts are not pertinent to this discussion, you know that,” Dumbledore said rather stiffly. “You cannot deny that the Hog’s Head regularly hosts Death Eaters, vampires, and all manner or Dark wizards and creatures.”

Ab cursed. “Yeah, and the first of those I host only because you bloody begged me to! I keep my charges safe,” he added stubbornly.

“Then what of Macnair?”

Harry could feel the tension through the radio.

“That was one time. His sort had never come into the pub that early in the day before. And the lad dealt with him handily, I gotta say.”

“And now the boy is likely a target! The pureblood movement cannot allow one of its high-ranking members to be bested in a bar fight by some random squib!”

Ab scoffed. “We’ll deal with whatever comes of it, if anythin’ comes of it.”

Harry could almost see the headmaster sadly shaking his head. “I tried to get the boy to divulge his true name and family. It would be best if he could be sent home.”

“Good luck to you on that score. He ain’t that stupid,” Ab muttered.

“Hmmm,” Dumbledore hummed noncommittally, “perhaps we should consider options in the muggle world.” He cut off Ab’s indignant response. “He can’t stay here, Aberforth, and he shouldn’t have to go back to living in a cave. Don’t you think it best that he instead be surrounded by children who are, well, more like him?”

Ab was silent for several beats. When he spoke again, Harry could feel his burning rage, barely kept in check. “I find it fascinating that you couldn’t be arsed to care about the boy when he was slowly starvin’ and freezin’ to death in the woods, but now that he’s here and got into it with Macnair, you’re suddenly so bloody devoted to his well-being.”

"I’m an imperfect man, like all men are, Aberforth. I’m sorry not to have checked on him earlier, of course, but I’m heartened to see that young Henry seems –”

“Harry.”

Silence.

“His fucking name is Harry.” Ab stated flatly. “You could at least take the time to learn his name before trying to exile him.”

“My apologies,” Dumbledore continued smoothly, ignoring Ab as he muttered a curse, “at any rate, I’m heartened to see that Harry seems an earnest, honorable young man, but –”

The sound of a fist hitting a table. “Ah, stop with the shite and tell me really why you want the boy gone!”

“Because the fact that you employ a squib will be taken as a sign that you support the Light!” Harry
recoiled as Dumbledore finally lost his cool. “We’ve been extremely fortunate that so few know of our relationship. This puts that fortune in jeopardy! If the Death Eaters believe that you have abandoned your vaunted neutrality and are aligned with me, then they may stop using the pub for meetings, and I’ll lose it as a vital source of information that could very well help me and the Order win this war!”

Harry couldn’t help but notice that Dumbledore was implying that he was equivalent to the Light. From Ab’s disdainful snort, he suspected the man had noticed it as well.

Dumbledore continued seriously, all pretense discarded and his voice weary. “I need intelligence to fight this war, Aberforth. Your choice to take in this squib, while noble and laudable, endangers us all. Can you not see that sending him away is for –”

Ab’s voice was calm and deadly. “If you say ‘the greater good,’ brother, I will end you.”

Silence.

“The boy stays. Period. As long as he wants, and at least until he pays off his debt to me.”

Dumbledore made to protest, but Ab cut him off. “I’m sorry if it’s inconvenient for you, but, unlike you, I don’t neglect, abandon, or ignore my charges – innocent children – because they’re inconvenient to my great plans.”

Dumbledore’s voice was conciliatory and sad. “He isn’t her, Aberforth.”

Harry could make out the sound of footsteps and a door creaking open.

“No, he ain’t,” Ab said simply. “He’s still alive. He still has a chance.”

And then there was nothing but footsteps and static.

Ariana regarded him sadly. Harry didn’t know what to think. He’d never been as quick about understanding people and their motivations as Hermione was. God, I miss her. She’d figure all this out in seconds. All he knew for sure was that the two men he most admired were arguing about him, and that one, whom he’d always trusted in the past (future, his mind supplied) wanted to get rid of him. But it seems like it’s important to the war that I leave! His mind interjected. He shook his head. He needed time to process all this.

The faint sounds of footsteps approaching from the floor above signaled that right now he wasn’t going to get that time. Ariana gave him a quick wave and a sympathetic smile before walking to the edge of the painting and disappearing. Harry moved away from the corner and sat back at the table. A few moments later, Ab stalked in.

“Lazing about? Get yourself back to the stables and get cleanin’, Harry!”

Aberforth had kept Harry busy for the rest of the day. Thoughts about the confrontation between the brothers flitted unproductively across his mind, but Harry’s greatest anxiety was centered on Ariana. She had seen him doing magic. Was she going to tell Ab? He tried a few times to escape to the sitting room to speak with her, but Ab didn’t give him a moment of rest or privacy. He’d eventually gone to bed, smarting from his lack of success.

In the dead hours of the night, after the pub had finally closed, Quisby had departed, and Ab had
gone to bed, Harry rose from his straw bed and walked on silent feet through the deserted Head. He successfully avoided all the creeks in the stairs and floorboards that would have betrayed him, and made his way to the sitting room. Ariana was sleeping peacefully with her back against a willow tree.

“Ariana,” he hissed softly, “Ariana, please wake up.” He eventually prodded her awake in gentle tones and convinced her to meet him in the painting in the kitchen.

When he arrived, he could see by his candlelight that Ariana was obviously not the type to appreciate having her sleep disturbed.

“I’m sorry to wake you, but, well, I really need to speak with you. In private,” he confessed. “I know you saw me, earlier, you saw me when I was …”

She arched a knowing eyebrow at him.

He rushed on, “Yeah, okay, when I was practicing magic. I want to explain, see, and I really need you to understand why you can’t tell anyone. Even Ab.”

She didn’t smile for once, but settled herself into the armchair with a soft looking blanket and gestured for him to go on.

Where do I start? How much do I tell her?

Looking into her kind, if currently rather cranky, face, it struck Harry just how desperate he was to tell someone what had happened to him. When he’d arrived in the past, he had needed a grownup, which he was surprised to realize he’d maybe – sort of – found in Aberforth. Now, though, now … Now I need a friend.

“I, er, I want to tell you my story, if that’s okay.”

She motioned for him to get on with it.

Taking a long, steadying breath, he began.

“Once upon a time … there was a boy who lived in cupboard. The boy was a wizard, you see, but he didn’t know he was. He lived with his aunt, uncle, and cousin. They … hated magic. The boy’s name was Harry Potter.”

Ariana’s eyes grew wide and were slowly filling with tears when he admitted his relatives’ attitude towards magic. It also seemed she recognized his surname from somewhere, but she never made a move to interrupt him. He went on and spoke for hours, telling her of his life at the Dursleys, his parents, his years at Hogwarts, his friends, Voldemort, Cedric, and finally the Dementor’s kiss and all the fears and anxieties that plagued him in 1976. She hung on every word.

“And so, now I’m here,” he concluded lamely and shifted nervously. “Do you … do you believe me?”

Ariana nodded slowly, her face amazed and serious.

“Are you going to tell anyone? Are you going to tell Ab?”

She considered him for a few moments, and then shook her head.

Harry breathed out his relief. “Thank you. And thank you for listening to me for so long.”
Ariana smiled and drew as close to the surface of the canvas as she could. She placed her palm flat against it, fingers spread, and looked at Harry with warm eyes.

Smiling softly, he approached from his end and raised his hand to meet her much smaller one. All he could feel was canvas, but he fancied that he could detect the faintest tinge of warmth spreading from her hand to his.

They stood together like that for a long time.

15 January, 1977

“Ahem.”

Harry’s head bolted up from underneath the pushcart, whose broken axle he was laboring to repair in the shed behind the Head. Turning round, he saw nothing and chalked the sound up to his imagination.

“Ahem!” Brow furrowed, Harry wiped his greasy hands on his rag and extracted himself from underneath his four-wheeled nemesis. He poked his head out the shed door and was met with an unexpected visitor.

The woman stood out starkly in the littered back garden of the Head. The olive robes under her open gray fur-trimmed coat were severe but stylish, accessorized with gleaming jewelry that bordered on gaudy. Her gray-streaked brown hair was coiffed in a stylish chignon, and her horn-rimmed glasses were trimmed in what he thought were supposed to be diamonds, but guttered in the pale afternoon sun more like rhinestones. Her thin, shapeless frame was poised delicately on a pair of spiked olive green heels that he knew wouldn’t last much longer in the snowy, muddy, mess behind the pub. Indeed, the sprawling golden stitching that spelled out a designer’s name on the side was already rendered illegible by caked mud. A red-tipped, manicured finger was tapping impatiently on a clipboard.

“Er, hi,” Harry greeted her, unconsciously rubbing his hands in the rag again and tossing it away. “Can I help you, ma’am?”

The woman looked at him as if he smelled offensive. “Madame Hornby of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Alcohol, Potions, and Magical Herbs Regulation Division,” she pronounced in a posh, cold voice. She did not offer him her hand.

“Oh.” Harry had blanched when she said “Ministry,” but it didn’t seem like she was there for him. The tapping of her finger on her clipboard increased in tempo.

She puffed herself up. “I am here, as per Ministry Regulation 1481B, sub-section 157, paragraph sigma, for the annual DMLE: APMHRD evaluation of this,” she clucked her tongue, “establishment.”

DMLEAPM – Seriously? ... I wonder what Scrabble word Hagrid could make out of that mouthful.

“Oh. Okay, I guess.” Harry stood awkwardly. Was he supposed to do something? “Er, you can just go in the front door if you like.”

The woman bristled. “I’ll get to interior inspections soon enough.” She extracted a rather ostentatious
cream-colored quill tipped in cherry red and thumbed through the scrolls on her clipboard. “Name?”

Harry stood dumbly for a moment. *Oh! She means my name!* “Uh, Harry, ma’am.”

“Surname?”

*Shite. Never did think of one. What the hell.* “I, uh, don’t have one ma’am.”

“Hmm,” she sniffed, “that will have to be recorded. Status?” At Harry’s blank look, she gave a long-suffering sigh. “Blood status, boy!”

“Oh …” *This would be tricky …* “I’m a squib, ma’am.” *That implies I’m pureblood, but I’m not actually claiming it.*

She fluttered her hand and took a small step back. Harry smirked internally as he noted that one of her heels was now slowly sinking into a pile of goat dung. “And you are employed here?,” she asked, aghast.

“Er, kinda? I mean, I owe the owner a debt, and I’m working it off.”

The ministry official gave him a withering look and shook her head. “I’ll certainly have to note that down as well,” she observed, her quill scratching across the form. “And do you reside on the premises?”

“I guess … I sleep in the stable with the goats, ma’am.”

She pursed her lips and made another note. “Well, at least the proprietor has some sense of decorum then.” Without another word she turned and marched around to the front door of the Head, the dramatic effect of her exit hampered by the wobbling of her heels on the uneven terrain.

*What the hell was that all about?*

Harry shrugged. It wasn’t really his concern, though he wondered if Ministry inspections were anything like muggle ones. He was pretty sure that the Head would fail every Health and Safety code in the country.

It was certainly the most drama he’d seen in the last few weeks. After Dumbledore’s Boxing Day visit he had waited for the man to take more decisive action against him, or for Death Eaters to attack him, but neither had occurred. Instead, life at the Head easily slipped back into a familiar rhythm. Harry had thought long and hard about what he should do in light of what he’d heard Dumbledore say, but couldn’t decide on anything beyond taking a “wait and see” approach.

An hour later, Harry trudged into the Head, having finally been victorious over the dastardly pushcart. He found Ab in a towering rage behind the bar.

“Do I want to know?” Harry whispered to Dalcop.

“DMLEAP – er, QRST ‘spection day,” the old drunk responded quietly. “New inspector this year, some jumped-up posh bint. Ab usually just bribes Daff Douceur to fudge the thing, but this one wasn’t having none of it.”

“Srryy la,” Wigol Palter slurred at him.

“Sorry?,” Harry interpreted. “Why are you sorry?”

Pel gave a snort. “’Cause you’re screwed now, my young friend. Ministry wants the Head to have a
thorough cleaning by this time next week. Three guesses who’s going to be stuck with that hell, an’
you know it won’t be Ab or Quimmy.” Harry would have smirked at the nickname, but he had a
sinking feeling he’d only need one of those guesses.

“Well fuck.”

Harry’s curse drew Ab’s attention. “Boy! What’re you doin’ doin’ nothin’? I’ve got a list for you to
get started on!”

His heart dropped as he eyed the short novel of a list, then turned and made his way to the kitchen to
get started.

Ab and the barflies watched him go.

“So why do ya think they’re comin’ after ya, Ab?” Dalcop asked. “Is it to do with the boy?”

Ab didn’t say anything and began wiping out glasses with a dirty rag.

“’Course it’s ‘cause of the boy,” Pel scoffed. “Can’t think of any reason why they’d do this other
than him. But who’s behind it?”

Dung Fletcher roused himself enough to participate. “For meself, I’d fink it Macnair, yeah? Bleedin’
tosser can’t abide that thrashin’ he got hisself.”

Ab glared hard at Dung. “S’a possibility. There’s others, though,” he said darkly, his mind on his
brother. The furious expressions of Yarda and some of the other pureblood dregs when Harry beat
the man popped into his head as well. Too many possibilities.

Dung shrunk in his seat.

“Dalcop, Dung, you two keep an ear open, yeah? Lemme know if you hear anything about this.”

“Sure thing, Ab,” Dalcop agreed, while Dung gave a more reluctant nod. “So what are ya goin’ to
do?”

Ab shrugged. “Get the boy cleanin’ more. Pass the inspection. And keep a hard watch.”

22 January, 1977

The Head looked … good, Harry thought early on the morning of the scheduled ministry inspection.

It bloody well better. I don’t think the skin on my hands is ever going to grow back quite right.

He had never worked so feverishly in his life before, and given that most of his life at been spent as
the Dursley’s house-elf, that was saying something. The wide wooden planks of the Head’s floors
gleamed golden in the firelight, and were matched by the equally warm and pristine wood in the
rafters and furniture. Harry had been shocked to discover that the stone walls were actually quite
lovely and of variegated earthen tones once he had meticulously scraped the accumulated years’ of
grime off of them. Hell, he’d even cleaned the great severed hog’s head that graced the pub walls,
though it took exception to his ministrations and kept trying to rip off his fingers. All the glasses
twinkled, and the windows had finally been freed of the dirt that clouded them over. Seeing natural
light streaming into the Head was … weird. Ab had immediately purchased dark gray curtains. Some changes are just too much.

Aberforth and Quisby had done most of the work in the guest rooms, as the former was forced to admit that there were some things that hard work just couldn’t fix without magic. He’d put Harry in charge of giving them a bit of a face-lift. All the furniture stayed the same, but Harry had selected clean new linens for each bed (he’d decided to make the fabrics in each room a different color), and Ab had even given him a bit of money to purchase a painting for each room from the Jumble, falling easily for Harry’s argument that Ariana might like some nice new places to visit.

The kitchen likewise gleamed, and Harry no longer feared the various beasties, seen and microscopic, that had once called the room home.

The only room to receive no extra attention was the stable. It had always been, after all, the cleanest place in the house.

Aberforth had been on edge all week, barking at patrons who dared sully anything. All but the most devoted clientele wisely decided to take their custom elsewhere until after the inspection. Yarda had been temporarily banned, Ab being loathe to have to purchase new linens again.

Harry had finished making certain that every one of their breakfast dishes had been washed and neatly stacked when Ab came down to the scullery with Wigol Palter, of all people, in tow.

“Lad, Wigol here needs some help at his place today. You’re goin’ with him. Be back by nine tonight, got it?” Wigol gave him a misty sort of smile as Ab left the kitchen abruptly.

Harry shrugged and followed the tiny, wispy-haired old man out the back door.

Wigol held out his arm. “Tkinwekingoh.”

Well, if he puts it that way …

Completely at a loss, Harry took a guess and grasped the man’s arm. He suddenly felt like his entire body was being squeezed through a straw that was spinning at great velocity. Just after it began, it stopped, and Harry fell to the ground choking back vomit. “What the bloody hell was that?”, he gasped.

Wigol gave him a toothless grin. “Prition”

‘Prition? Wha—Oh … Apparition! So that’s what apparating feels like? God, it’s even worse than Flooing.

Harry stood up shakily and looked around. They were clearly in a deserted, dingy Muggle area, maybe underground, judging from the tunnel-like walls. “Where are we?”

Wigol pointed at a sign on the far wall that read Old London Bridge. “We’re in London? Under the Bridge?” Well, this was at least interesting.

The wizened old man nodded and beckoned Harry to follow him up to a door marked Danger: High Vantage. There was a design that somewhat looked like an electrical symbol, but was backwards and curved oddly.

High Vantage? Nice try, wizards.

Through the door was a short staircase, a long dark hallway, another door, a hallway, and finally
they arrived at a perfectly circular, bright purple door that reminded Harry of something out of a Tolkien novel. Wigol spoke an incomprehensible password and the door sprang open.

Harry blinked. They were deep underground, under the Thames, he was sure of it, but huge circular windows letting in streaming sunlight ran the length of the long, vaulted room before him. Graceful pillars soared up to the cavernous ceiling. The great room would have been beautiful, were it not filled to the brim with boxes, magazines, books, newspapers, and newspaper cuttings stacked at odd intervals throughout its great expanse. Every wall but one was likewise papered with cuttings. The fourth wall was lined with shelves upon which sat hundreds of crystal balls. Some glowed blue, most were black, while a few emitted a faint white light every so often. Wigol navigated a path through the clutter that took them to a sitting room-like area. A low table in front of a green couch was piled with newspapers, muggle and magical. Harry was surprised to see a muggle television set, which Wigol turned on with a flick of his wand.

He beckoned Harry to sit in the comfortable red armchair while he settled himself on the couch and used his wand to set the television to an episode of *Coronation Street*. Harry was vaguely familiar with the soap opera. Aunt Petunia had watched it religiously, though he was convinced most of the humor went over her head.

Loud birdsound drew Harry’s attention away from the television. He looked up and saw a small unkindness of seven ravens nestled in roosts built on a shelf underneath one of the great round windows. The ravens all eyed him intently.

*It’s official. Wigol has the weirdest house ever.*

“Er, Mr. Palter sir? What work do you need me to do?” Harry ventured. *Please don’t say organize all your newspapers, please don’t say organize all your newspapers … By the time I got done I’d be back in 1995!*

Wigol gave him a toothless grin and said something that Harry interpreted as “Nothing. Ab just wanted you out of the way for the inspection.” Maybe.

Okay then. Harry mentally shrugged. *This place at least smells better than my last babysitter’s*, he thought with a shudder, remembering the odor of Mrs. Figg’s cats.

For the next hour they watched *Coronation Street* on the television. Every so often Wigol would use his wand to rewind the program, watch it intently, mutter something, grab a notebook, and jot a note down before restarting the show.

The man took his soap operas seriously, Harry concluded.

After the credits ran, Wigol mumbled something about “ghtintawerk” and absconded to a study area of the great room where he spent the next several hours holding the same black crystal ball to his ears and then flipping through books before writing copiously on parchment. Harry was left to entertain himself with the television. He enjoyed the irony of it all. He grew up muggle but had never been granted the privilege of spending a day in front of the telly. No, he had to travel to the past and go to an impossible hoarder’s cathedral under the Thames to do so.

At one point he happened to glance at Wigol’s abandoned *Coronation Street* notebook. The page was open to the one the little man had been filling in. Below the date his notes sprawled out in a surprisingly elegant hand. “E.G. Bishop (S. Hancock): piano— will play for exotic dancer = marital strife. Violent death due to work-related dispute will follow in less than a year. Pointless.” Flipping through previous entries, Harry found much the same. A character’s name, followed by cryptic notes, all in the future tense.
He found himself staring at the masses of crystal balls when it finally struck him. *Is Wigol … is he making divination predications about what’s going to happen on a Muggle soap opera?!!*

This theory only went to support the more comprehensive one that Harry had been formulating since he was eleven.

Wizards could be really, really strange.

Harry rather wanted to check back with *Coronation Street* to see if poor Mr. Bishop really was doomed. (*)

He spent a happily restful day lounging on the couch as Palter worked, or whatever it was that he was doing. After the week he’d had, Harry felt he enjoyed the little holiday.

Wigol served him a strange lunch, then an equally strange dinner (seriously, the man had an unhealthy obsession with black-eyed peas and persimmon seeds), before apparating him back to the Head just before nine.

As Wigol claimed his regular seat at the bar, which was being manned by a cranky-looking Quisby, he tipped Harry a wink, which Harry returned with a grin and a muttered “Thanks for today, Mr. Palter.” Harry then rushed down the stairs and found Ab in the kitchen.

“Well?,” he asked breathlessly.

“We passed,” was Ab’s simple answer, the grin fighting to break out on his face the only evidence that he had been worried about the inspection. “Have a good holiday, did you?”

Harry gave a little laugh. “Yeah, I did. It was … really odd, but actually pretty nice. Thanks.”

Ab waved him off. “No need to thank me, boy. Didn’t need a fool like you here to foul it up, did I? At any rate, I’ve added on an extra day a’ work to your tab to make up for it.”

*Of course you did.*

Unable to fall asleep, Harry tossed and turned in his bed that night, much to Goat’s dissatisfaction. He normally passed out by ten from all the work he did for Ab, but a day spent sprawled and napping on Wigol’s couch left him with excess energy.

Thus he caught the low voices out behind the Head that he would likely have otherwise slept through.

There were only two or three of them, he was fairly sure, and they sounded male, but he could make out nothing but the general impression of their voices.

Harry moved to the outside door of the stables and bent down to his knees to listen through the sliver between the bottom of the door and the ground. A few words here and there became almost intelligible, but the only thing the position gained him was the surety that the voices belonged to other teenagers.

He knew that he should either ignore them or go for Aberforth, but his annoyance with that fact that some blokes were invading his backyard and gadding about in front of his bedroom (okay, the
stables, but still) made him bold. Harry flicked his wrist just so and the dagger Ab had given him shot into his hand with a soft schick. See Ab, I’m not using it in the pub. His lips curled into a reckless smile as he opened the door with his other hand, triggering the security torches that Ab had set.

Torchlight flooded the small back garden, illuminating the figures of three teenage boys, all bigger than him, who were huddled over by the door to the shed. They jumped at the sudden light, and whirled around to face him, two with their wands drawn and ready.

*Oh Merlin. It’s them.* Harry’s stomach fluttered.

In the clearing stood Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, and the sixteen year old version of his father. Sirius and … James were pointing their wands at him, all three of their faces wearing the universal expression of teenagers who are caught when they are up to something.

*We don’t … we don’t look that much alike,* was the dumbfounded thought that rang in Harry’s head. Since entering the wizarding world, he’d heard ad nauseum that he looked “just like his father,” but “had his mother’s eyes.” While the latter was true, staring at his father he had to wonder just what everyone else had seen. James’ hair was a chestnut brown unlike his much darker locks, James had a broader face and features that were much less … (Harry struggled for the word) … sharp, and he had several inches and at least a few stone of muscle on his future son. *Really, the only things that are all that similar are the fact that we both wear glasses and have bad hair,* though in fact the latter was hardly true anymore. Harry hadn’t had a haircut since before the Third Task; his mop of black hair now brushed his shoulders and the weight kept it fairly in line.

*Why does everyone say we look alike?*

*Maybe people just saw what they wanted to see, or what they expected to see,* his internal voice suggested. *It’s not that we look dissimilar, really, and if someone knew we were related they could probably point out little resemblances. But on the whole, I’m no copy of him.*

The thought was at once distressing, for he had always cherished the comparison to his father that people made, and a relief. Ever since he arrived in Hogsmeade he’d been on tenterhooks expecting someone to point at him and loudly proclaim his obvious Potter heritage. His fear, he saw, had been quite groundless.

Sirius looked like, well Sirius, if he were young and hadn’t gone to Azkaban. Shorter than James but still tall compared to Harry, he cut quite the dashing figure with devil-may-care eyes and irritatingly spectacular hair. Remus hadn’t quite hit his growth spurt yet; Harry knew he would eventually tower over Padfoot, but now he was barely an inch taller than his friend. He had fewer scars, a fresher face, and seemed considerably happier than the good-natured but dour fellow Harry had met in the future.

*This is them. This is the Marauders – the ones who matter – before the world caught up with them.*

Oblivious to the shock that their presence caused the boy who had burst from the Head’s back door, James, Sirius, and Remus were all silently considering the best reaction to his unexpected appearance. Harry, however, snapped back to reality first.

Without saying a word, he crossed his arms, knife glinting in the dim light, and assumed a pose that clearly inquired as to “why the hell are you here?”

Sirius broke quickly. “Whoa, who are you?,” the question popping unchecked from his mouth. James slapped him on the shoulder.
They clearly had not expected that response, though after a moment James’ eyes widened. “Hey, I heard Lily and Marlene talking about you! You’re the squi–,” He cut himself off, unsure how to proceed, and colored a bit as Remus gave him a chastising look.

Harry arched an eyebrow.

Sirius recovered quickly, pasted a broad, charming smile on his face, and moved closer, his hand out as though to shake Harry’s. “Squibbulus, my friend, we come in peace! In fact, we would be glad of an alliance with you, as we admit to having suffered a minor setback in our planned festivities!” The smell of alcohol on his breath suggested that Sirius had started the festivities a bit early.

Harry’s mind refused to accept that Sirius had just called him ‘Squibbulus.’ Seriously, Sirius? I love you, but … but you’re kind of acting like a bloody moron! Rather than addressing the issues with that particular moniker, Harry opted to show no reaction at all and ignored his outstretched hand.

Though his eyes dimmed as he lost some confidence, Sirius soldiered on. “You see, we were tasked by our compatriots to obtain refreshments for this evening’s celebration. Gryffindor thrashed the ‘Puffs, don’t you know,” he added in a conspiratorial tone.

No, I didn’t know. Harry sighed. “So you’re here to buy alcohol?”

“Ah, now you’ve got it! In fact, our dear friend Wormtail is bravely causing a distraction to mask our absence as we speak!” Sirius exclaimed as Lupin put his head in his hands. “But thus is our difficulty. In times past,” he explained dramatically, “your establishment has gladly supplied us with spirits for our brethren back at the school. Tonight however, the young rapscallion and the wizened elder behind the bar both refused to sell us our desired supply.” Oh for fuck’s sake Sirius, tipsy or not, you sound like an idiot. “Apparently,” young Sirius confessed, “there is an issue of the questionable legality of such a purchase, even though I assure you I am of age!”

Translation: Ab and Quisby won’t sell you stuff to take back to the school because they’re worried about the Ministry.

“And?,” Harry questioned in a bored tone that masked his irritation with his godfather.

“And we would be eternally grateful if you could make such a transaction with us. We’ll happily pay the gold if you could just deliver our order to us out here.” Sirius flashed him a toothy grin.

Ab would murder me if I tried that. And you called me Squibbulus. No dice, Padfoot.

“No.”

“No. I will not help you,” Harry stated baldly.

Sirius floundered, while James lumbered forward a bit unsteadily (guess Sirius isn’t the only one to have already had a few pints tonight) to try a different tactic. “Look, kid, just sell us the whiskey – or even beer, if you want. We’ve got the money and nobody else needs to know.”

“No.”

James stared at him, hazel eyes flashing. “You don’t get it! People are expecting us to come through! We always come through!”
He sounds so young. He really sounds like a kid. Harry sighed. “No.” And with that James cracked.

He tottered slightly and ran an anxious hand through his hair. “Dammit, do you even know who we are?” He plowed forward without waiting for an answer. “I’m James Potter. This here is Sirius Black. Potter? Black? Sound familiar? They should. Our families sure as hell aren’t ones to cross, so put your little knife away, go on down to the cellar, and bring us what we came here for, yeah, or you’ll see what wizards can do with wands.”

He sounds like Draco Malfoy. My dad sounds like Draco fucking Malfoy … and he’s trying to bully me. Profound disappointment flowed through Harry like it was carried in every cell of his blood. Snape was right. I don’t care if he’s a bit drunk or not, my dad really was kind of a prick. My mother was stuck-up and my dad was a prick. He suddenly just felt annoyed and thoroughly tired of all this shit.

Harry shook his head to clear it and then said firmly in an emotionless voice, “Okay then. Let’s see what you can do with your wands.” I really just want to go back to bed.

Sirius gaped, dumbfounded. James looked surprised, but raised his wand to Harry with a bold twisting of his lips. A shocked Remus batted his friend’s arm away before he could release a spell. Harry, meanwhile, had quickly darted from the steps and moved within striking distance of the trio.

What am I doing? What am I doing? I’m not actually going to fight my dad, right? His mind screamed at him. Luckily, Harry was spared from finding out just what he was going to do.

Ab suddenly stepped from the shadows around the side of the pub. “Black, Potter, Lupin! What the ever-living fuck do you think you’re doing!” The Marauders blanched, clearly not expecting adult intervention. “Bah, never mind, you worthless pieces of shit. Best part of you ran down your daddies’ legs, didn’t it? Get your arses off my property. And,” he added with furious relish, “that’s a five year ban on the lot of you. Don’t let me see you back here ‘til your balls have dropped some.”

The Marauders’ jaws hit the floor.

Harry found himself speaking without making the conscious decision to do so. His mind’s eye was focused on Moony. “Hey Lupin? Just so you know, it isn’t just beasts in the Forest at night. Please be careful. You may have shit taste in friends, but I don’t take you as the sort to want to hurt people.” After all, he’d be moving back to his cave soon enough. He certainly didn’t want an unleashed, unchecked werewolf running by his front door.

Lupin paled, James looked alarmed, and Sirius’ eyes filled with rage. (*)

Ab growled, and the boys wisely fled.

It wasn’t as nearly bad as when he first met his mother, Harry thought idly. He was bitterly, sure, but he already knew he could live with such disappointment. He’s still just a kid. A stupid, entitled kid.

Ab walked over and grasped his shoulders. “All right there, lad?”

A pause. “Yeah. I’m okay.”

Ab gave him a speculative look. “You know those tossers?”

“No,” Harry said distantly, his mind on the confrontation, “not really.”
Ab grunted and led him inside by the front door. Even though it was way past Harry’s pub curfew, the old man said nothing when Harry flopped onto a stool next to Pelother. Instead, he filled a shot glass with Firewhiskey and passed it to Harry, his customary frown barely masking his curiosity.

“This one’s on the house, lad.”

Harry didn’t even feel the burn as the whiskey slid smoothly down his throat. A few beats later he felt like his esophagus was on fire as tears pricked in his eyes and he gasped helplessly. The barflies laughed as Pel clapped him on the back. “First one’s always the worst one, my young friend!”

He smiled along with the regular crowd and tried very hard not to dwell on the thought that his young father would be dead and his godfather in Azkaban before Ab’s five year ban on the Marauders expired.

Chapter End Notes

(*) Spoilers from 1977: Mr. Bishop was doomed.

(*) Based on the timeline of the Marauders’ sixth year, Sirius has already tricked Snape into going through the tunnel to meet Mooney at this point. Although Harry surely remembers learning something vague about this in PoA, in this scene he hardly has Snape on his mind and is really thinking of keeping himself safe. Was it a reckless thing for Harry to say? Yeah, probably.
VI. Massacre, Maneuverings, and a Montage

14 February, 1977

Harry had been with Ab for more than two months now. He’d been worked to the bone and slowly exposed to an adult world that was far different from his life either at the Dursleys’ or at Hogwarts. Yet he found himself strangely content, even happy, with this new life, despite his anxieties regarding the time line and the sharp pangs that hit him whenever he thought about Ron, Hermione, and Sirius.

Aberforth was, well, Aberforth. He was perpetually grumpy, brusque, misanthropic, and sarcastic, but at the same the knife strapped to Harry’s arm and the warm straw bed in the stables were constant reminders that Ab gave a crap about him. Ab’s temper was a terrifying thing, and Harry took care to stay on the right side of it, but he’d not really been scared of Ab since the first night they had met in Harry’s cave.

Until today.

Ab stalked through the bar like a rabid dog biting and snarling at everyone who dared address him. Quisby had nearly been reduced to tears and Harry found himself almost feeling bad for the jerk.

“Shaddup ‘bout the ‘Sticks, you piece of shit! Get it through your thick skull that it’ll never be yours. Tab ain’t blind and he ain’t stupid – knows exactly what a worthless fuck you are, just like the rest a’ us!,” he had shouted out of nowhere when he happened across the young man discoursing on his favorite topic.

Ouch. Sure, we all know Ab’s right that the pub’s going to Rosmerta, but that was still cold.

Indeed, a pissed off bartender who’d spent years listening to the intimate details of his patrons’ lives has the best arsenal in the world for causing pain. His biting remarks to Quisby, Nappy, Yarda, and others had to sting something terrible.

Harry was very dedicated to the idea of staying out Ab’s way today.

It had all started when the afternoon Prophet arrived, its headlines screaming in a huge, bold font.

**Horror in Hayle!**

*Early Morning Attack Claims the Lives of 19 Witches and Wizards!*

*More Than 180 Other Victims of the Valentine’s Day Massacre!*

Harry hadn’t had a chance to read the entire article, as Ab had snatched it from his hands and disappeared upstairs for some time, but the Hayle massacre was the talk of the pub. From what Harry could gather before he fled to the kitchens to escape the rampaging bartender, that morning Death
Eaters had apparated into Hayle, a rather sleepy Muggle town in the far west, which also happened to house a fairly substantial wizarding settlement given that the area headquartered the great Potage’s Cauldron Factory. Half the force had stormed the factory and killed all whom they saw, including the Potage patriarch, two of his three adult children, and the famous cauldron innovator Gaspard Shingleton. The rest of the Death Eaters had swarmed the village, cutting down all they encountered.

The ministry had responded with a full force of Aurors, but by the time they arrived the damage was done. Apparently the contingent had been mustered prior to the massacre, but faulty intelligence had led them to believe that Hayes, in the Greater London area, was the intended target, not Hayle.

From the shocked reactions of the Head’s patrons, Harry surmised that this was the first major offensive committed by Voldemort and his minions, who had largely operated in the shadows of wizarding politics up to this point. While some, like Quisby, seemed entirely unconcerned about the nearly two hundred muggles who had died, they nonetheless were profoundly disturbed that several respected purebloods had been targeted. Harry supposed their deaths didn’t exactly coincide with Riddle’s purported pro-pureblood agenda.

The massacre terrified Harry for completely different reasons. He had a vague recollection of an exam question in his first year about Gaspard Shingleton, who had invented the Self-Stirring Cauldron in … 1983! And he knew, he knew, that Aeris Potage had been in charge of Potage’s Cauldrons in his own time, but now the paper claimed him among the dead … Harry wasn’t sure if Voldemort had attacked Hayle in the original timeline, but he was certain that, even if he had, it had played out differently this time.

The timeline has changed. It’s been changed. Period. Harry thought, his hands shaking and his stomach a vast hole that churned in on itself. Is this my fault? What could I have done to make this happen? The smallest change, something I would never even notice, could have set off a chain reaction that led to this …

There were no answers, only that terrible, gnawing, guilty worry.

Given his raw emotional state, Harry thought it prudent to take even more care to avoid the raging Aberforth. When he heard Ab finally descending from the floor above, he flattened himself into the shadows as the wizard stomped towards the door to the kitchen. As soon as he was out of sight, Harry hightailed it up the stairs and ensconced himself in Room 5, which he now called the Yellow Room after its new linens.

Although he liked Room 3, the Green Room, best for its rather nice view of the village streets below, the Yellow Room had become his favorite destination in the last few weeks. He closed the door and turned his attention to the new element of the room that had kept him coming back. The large mirror framed in oiled bronze.

Approaching the mirror, he whispered “Ariana? Ariana can you hear me? If you can, would you please come to the Yellow Room?”

He gave as much of a smile as his current anxieties allowed when the girl walked serenely into field of the mirror and sat down on the reflection of the same bed upon which stood behind Harry, looking at him questioningly. It was as odd as ever to see a painted person appearing in the reflected reality of the room, but he had more important things on his mind.

“Do you know what’s going on? Why Ab is so upset? There was a … the Death Eaters killed a bunch of people, but Aberforth seems to be taking it too hard.”

Ariana nodded sadly and turned around to the desk that was reflected in the mirror. Harry had been
sure to keep quills and parchment on the real desk so that they’d be available for his friend. After a moment, she picked up the parchment she’d been scribbling on and walked up to the very fore of the mirror.

This was why Harry loved the Yellow Room. He had thought he was spending a few knuts at Jinky's Jumble for a regular old magical mirror. But he and Ariana had quickly discovered that the mirror was singular in that it connected with paintings in the same building, allowing the girl to truly experience a taste of the Hog's Head for the first time. She'd been beside herself with glee when a heaving Harry carted the mirror all around the Head to let her explore with her own hands everything from the pub to the kitchens to the stables.

Later Harry had the idea of hanging the mirror so that it would feature a desk, quills, and parchment, thus allowing for much improved communication between the two teenagers. Granted, interpreting mirror writing gave him a headache, but the throbs in his eyes and temples after particularly long conversations were still worth it.

He frowned as he worked out Ariana’s response. Ab overheard bad men talking in the pub. He’s the one who told Albus that they were going to attack another town. He thinks it’s his fault.

“So Ab’s the one who heard, or thought he heard, that they were going to attack Hayes, he reported it his brother (and isn’t that interesting, he thought to himself), but they attacked Hayle instead?”

Ariana nodded gravely.

Shite. Poor Aberforth. No wonder the man was terrorizing the pub. He was furious with himself, but taking it out on everyone else.

“Can I do anything to help him?”

Ariana shrugged, eyes sad.

Harry sighed. “Keep an eye on him, yeah? Let me know if, well if you think he needs me.”

Ariana nodded and gave Harry a little wave as he left the room.

Later that night Harry sat in the soft glow of the stable staring at the wizarding photo of the Valentine’s Day Massacre in the Prophet that he had scrounged from the rubbish bin. Bodies of muggles lined the streets. The only part of them that moved was their hair, which whipped across their faces, blown by the winter wind that howled from the Celtic Sea through the town. The picture wasn’t in color, but it wasn’t hard to guess that the long black streaks which marred the newly fallen snow would have been red stains had he viewed the scene in person. He spied the legs of Ministry or muggle officials off in the background, pacing, stopping, pausing, stopping. They were of little concern to him.

Harry’s eyes were riveted to the bottom left corner instead, where a very young, presumably Muggle,
child kept breaking into the frame, trying desperately to touch the corpse of what was once a pretty young woman. The hands of some unseen adult kept catching the sobbing child and dragging her back out of the picture.

He watched the girl’s attempt to get close to the woman he figured was her mother replay for hours. He wondered if the hands that thwarted her were those of her father, those of someone who loved her and would care for her in a world without her mother.

After awhile, his eyes fastened on the tiny caption the *Prophet* had printed below the picture, and his rage burned deep and dangerous.

*Ministry officials contrive laudable excuse for muggle casualties: explosion at local factory!*

Nothing about who the pictured dead were. Nothing about the little girl. Nothing about the horror of the scene.

No, the vision of a street teeming with the dead was twisted into praise for the Ministry.

Indeed, not a single muggle name was mentioned in the story, only that more than 180 of them were dead.

_Sometimes, Harry thought, it’s hard not to hate the wizarding world._

He snorted derisively when he considered the Ministry’s “laudable” excuse for the disaster. Sure, an explosion. Except the buildings were largely undamaged, the glass in their windows almost entirely intact. _Bastards_, Ab’s voice grumbled in his head.

Shaking his head, he stared down as the little girl’s struggles began anew.

A thought lanced through him like a chilled spear.

_This is what Voldemort does._

The magnitude of the Dark Lord’s wanton cruelty didn’t surprise him, not really. But this … Up until now, Harry’s experience of Voldemort had been entirely personal. Voldemort killed _his_ parents. _He_ fought the shade of Voldemort in first year. In second year, the memory of Voldemort had possessed _his_ best friend’s little sister, was threatening _his_ home, had fought against _him_. Fourth year the Dark Lord had ordered Cedric to be killed in front of _him_, had targeted _him_ for the tournament, had used _his_ blood, had again dueled with _him_ in person.

Harry didn’t know the sobbing girl, nor did he know her mother, or any of the other people, magic or muggle, who had been slaughtered on Voldemort’s orders that day. He couldn’t grieve for them, only sympathetically, abstractly, regret their loss.

But.

But this was somehow so much worse than what Voldemort did to him.

_This is what Voldemort does. It’s personal for a lot of people, not just me._

A fleeting vision of a great web of pain and devastation with Voldemort as its rotting red center flashed before his eyes, its oozing black tendrils radiating outwards in countless directions to latch onto and extinguish thousands of tiny, sparkling lights, which then in turn caused even more thousands of lights to flicker and dim.
Of course he had known from the moment he time-traveled that Voldemort was alive and active in the 1970s, but being away from Hogwarts and his scar’s blessed silence since being Kissed had made it easy for him to put Voldemort out of his mind. He had had more immediate concerns in the first months, and life at the Head had been so relatively peaceful that he had allowed himself to be lulled into a false sense of security. He had no delusion that Riddle had any reason to target him specifically, but the day’s massacre testified in red streaks on white snow that tons of people died and would die in this war whose names Voldemort would never think to learn.

This fight isn’t about me. And it’s not about my parents, or Ron and Hermione, or anyone I love. It’s about … he struggled for the words. It’s about the thousands of people whose names I’ll never know either, people who suffer because of that bastard. It’s about all of us, and none of us.

Harry thought back to the reactions of the patrons when Macnair had attacked him. All of them, even the ones who liked Harry well enough, hell, even Pel, had just stood there. Maybe if the fight had lasted longer some of them would have joined in, but the fact was that they all had believed him helpless and yet hadn’t helped him.

I can’t just sit here and do nothing. I can’t be someone who sits at the bar and minds their business. I just can’t. I won’t. I don’t have to win this war – I don’t think I can do that, anyway – but I have to be part of it. Somehow.

Meanwhile, Ab was grinding his teeth as his brother paced the length of the shed in the back garden.

“Please, Aberforth, I need you to think, to remember, and to be absolutely sure! Is it possible that you misheard the name of the town, or was this a deliberate attempt to identify if the Head is compromised?”

“I’ll not say it again, Albus! Yes, it’s possible I misunderstood the conversation. Don’t think I did, but I could’ve. Yes, this could also be a way to smoke out my loyalties. The leaks in the Ministry already made it clear even to the bloody Prophet that the Aurors were tipped off to a specific town. If Rowle and Selwyn’s conversation in the Head was a set-up, they could definitely suspect that I’m the informant. I just don’t bloody know!”

His older brother regarded him gravely. “Give me the memory. Please.”

Drawing his wand, Ab removed the glistening blue strand from his temple and deposited it in the Pensieve waiting on top of the pushcart. Looking at each other, the brothers both leaned in.

The Head was busy that night. A young woman in a revealing dress was slinking through the bar, singing a tawdry, off-key version of some Celestina Warbeck song. Yarda glared at her from her perch in a “friend’s” lap and made loud, disparaging comments while Quisby looked on appreciatively and joined in the catcalls. A group of werewolves were arguing over their card game. The boys at the bar were enjoying an animated discussion of which Holyhead Harpy best combined sex appeal and athletic skill. Ab stood near the till, trying to appear busy while keeping a sharp eye on a table in the corner, at which sat two well-dressed men who seemed as though they were trying not to seem well-dressed. They had been nursing their drinks for more than an hour.

Ab didn’t need to glance up to know that an owl had just flown into the Head through the tiny door in the ceiling. He wandered over to the table near the two men’s and arrived just as one of the men unrolled the parchment he’d taken from the owl. As the bartender took the drink order for the
threesome at the table, he heard one of the men behind him snap his fingers to get the other’s attention.

“ – one more pint of Hog’s Head Brew and a Firewhiskey shot for us –”

“Sing us another love!,” someone shouted as the girl finished her rendition.

“It’s on for tomorrow. 7:30. Target’s Hay –”

“ – send us some of those sweet pickles, eh Ab?”

The real Aberforth closed his eyes. He’d really believed he’d heard ‘Hayes,’ but on review he might have gotten the ‘S’ from the patron who was speaking to him.

Memory Aberforth felt the men behind him stand and depart, and watched them go with a weather eye.

The brothers Dumbledore were ejected from the Pensieve back into the cobwebs of the shed.

“He could have said the name of either place,” Albus concluded, putting his head in his hands.

Ab nodded. “Aye.”

His brother’s hand curled into a frustrated fist before relaxing and wearily moving to his temple.

“You may well be compromised, but we cannot know from this. We’ll just have to treat all your information in the future as possible but not necessarily likely until we get clear evidence that they suspect you or don’t.” He sighed. “This is going to make things much more difficult.”

Neither said anything more for several minutes. “They find any more bodies?”

Albus looked at his brother, his eyes sympathetic. “Yes.” He seemed to age. “Seventeen more, at last count.”

Ab pursed his lips and said nothing.

“It’s not your fault, Aberforth,” Albus said gently.

“It might be!” Ab bit back. “Guess we’ll never know about this time either.”

Albus looked away.

Finally, the elder brother broke the silence. “You really should send the boy away. He’s eroding your cover at best.”

“Oh fuck you, Albus.”

“Listen to me! I know that you confronted Crispin Cordwaine about his refusal to sell to the boy. I know that you protected him from the inspectors who came here. I even know that you banned Potter and Black from the pub because they accosted him. If I know these things, Aberforth, others know them as well! Perhaps not all, but enough. He’s distracting you from your purpose, and in doing so, however innocently, he’s putting himself, you, and this war in jeopardy. I do not wish to say it, but if the Hayle massacre was an attempt to flush you out, it was almost certainly your relationship with that boy which lead them to think that you might not be neutral.”

Ab turned white. “Are you blaming me for the massacre, Albus?”
Albus sighed heavily. “No. I suppose not.” He looked out the small shed window. “I know what you think of me. I know what you think of my priorities. I won’t argue with you about them any more. However, sometimes even you must admit that we want for ourselves and what we want for the world must necessarily come into conflict. I do believe that this is one of those times for you.”

“Maybe you’re right, I don’t know.” Aberforth said, nodding slowly. “But I was always the fool, wasn’t I, not the bastard. Either way, the boy stays.”

Albus gave his brother an unreadable look and turned to leave.

“Don’t let me find out that you were behind the Ministry’s little visit, brother,” Ab said darkly to his back.

“I truly was not,” Dumbledore said softly. “However, I will not deny that I hoped the Ministry’s intervention might lead to the boy’s apprehension and assignment to a more suitable home.”

Ab snorted. “Yep. S’ppose that would have been awfully convenient.”

20 February, 1977

Harry sat absolutely still on his bed, his brow furrowed in intense concentration.

You’re a Slytherin. A Slytherin. Be the Slytherin …

You feel like a Slytherin. You think like a Slytherin. You like the things Slytherins like. You like green, and dungeons, and expensive clothing and … poncey hairstyles. And snakes. You love snakes, and, er … sneering. Yes, you love to sneer. You especially love to sneer and think about snakes when you are plotting, because you love to plot dastardly, clever schemes and are very good at it. No one can plot like you can, Slytherin Harry.

So … plot!

Plot now!

Thirty second later, Harry the Gryffindor bumbled in and interrupted. Think of a dastardly plot yet?

He sighed, opened his eyes, and flopped himself onto his back on the bed.

Stupid idea anyway.

While it had been all well and good to come to a deeper philosophical understanding of Voldemort, himself, and the war, philosophy didn’t do much for him in terms of figuring out the practicalities of actually training to fight Riddle. He was working from quite the intractable position. He had no teachers or Defense books to help him become a better wizard, his wand was buried under leaves in a bloody cave, and even if he had a wand, he certainly couldn’t practice at the Head or anywhere in Hogsmeade.

Hence his need for a clever scheme, and his consequent attempt to access whatever Slytherin qualities the Sorting Hat had once seen in him.

Stupid hat.
Harry had managed to scrounge up a single book of spells, though he doubted it would be of any real use, assuming he ever got a chance to actually practice them. In the course of scouring the Head for the Ministry inspection, he had discovered shoved into the back of one of the kitchen cabinets a moldered copy of *Tweeny Twig’s Guide for Young Domestics*, a compendium of archaic household spells from what looked like the eighteenth century. Harry had shrugged and hidden it away in the stable. Any magic was better than no magic. He snorted at the thought of using Tweeny’s patented cauldron cleaning spell on Voldemort.

Although he hadn’t yet figured out any answers to his immediate problems, the week since the Hayle Valentines’ Day Massacre, as it was now generally referred to, had seen him make some great strides in his magic. He was pretty sure he’d finally mastered the silent, wandless *Accio* he’d been practicing nightly for months, though he hadn’t dared summon anything heavier than a large keg of Hog’s Head Brew for fear of losing control and causing damage he couldn’t hide. Best of all, he had just discovered that *Depulso*, the banishing charm, worked almost immediately for him when he started trying to do it silently without a wand. It made some sense, he had mused. After all, *Accio* and *Depulso* were essentially the same magic, just focused in opposite ways. Maybe his long nights spent training his body, mind, and magic to work *Accio* had prepared him equally for *Depulso*?

He shrugged. The charm worked, and that’s all that really mattered. He’d leave the theory to folks like Hermione. Tonight he planned to start on *Alohomora*. That was totally different magic, he figured, and would take him just as long as *Accio* had.

Harry gazed through his window at the icicles on the gable of the Head dripping in the sunlight. The spring thaw seemed to be coming early this year. It wouldn’t be long before the Forest was positively teeming with wildlife, happy to stretch their limbs in the warming air after a winter’s hibernation or migration.

*I can’t believe it’s nearly March. If I were in my time, O.W.L.s would be fast approaching. I bet Hermione’s driving Ron crazy with study charts about now.*

*Nearly March …*

Harry bolted up. His three months with Ab would probably be up in March! He’d never gotten a hard deadline for when his debt would be repaid, but it had to be soon. His pulse quickened and his stomach fluttered at the thought of leaving the Head, but he reminded himself that he had always known this wasn’t to be a permanent arrangement. Besides, it wasn’t as if he’d never see Ab again.

Unhappy though he might be because of it, his impending departure did provide him a great excuse for leaving the village every so often. He scampered off to find Ab, quickly cobbled together the best way to present his request without actually lying outright.

The old bartender was sitting in an armchair by the pub’s fireplace reading the *Prophet* when Harry burst in, moving rather more quickly than he had intended.

“Waz wrong, lad?,” Dalcop slurred, startled by his entrance. The barflies all peered at him over their pints.

“Smooth, Potter. Real smooth.”

“Er-, nothing, sorry.” He crossed the room to Ab. “Um, I need to ask you a favor. Please.”

The barflies blatantly turned in their seats to watch the conversation.

“Seriously, guys? Shove off!” Harry smiled in exasperation before continuing in a lower voice. “Ab,
it’s almost spring, see, and I’ve got to start getting things ready. See, last summer I collected a bunch of seeds and was planning on starting little gardens by the cave and in the forest. I’ve also got a ton of traps to make – I’m sure the ones I had last year didn’t survive the winter.”

Ab was looking at him silently.

Harry rushed on, “So what I’m asking, is for a bit of time now and then to go to the cave to get things ready. I know I, uh, I can’t stay here forever, and I figure the debt’s gotta be almost paid by now, yeah?”

Ab nodded slowly.

“I just need to go for a few hours a few times a week. I know that’ll eat into my work time here, but I can stay on for a few extra days to make sure I’m all paid up ... So, uh, what do you say?”

Ab regarded him. The boys at the bar didn’t even bother to pretend they weren’t listening, and a table of old women playing cards with Wigol Palter of all people looked on with interest.

“You gotta do what you gotta do, boy,” Ab said flatly with a short nod of his head.

Harry was confused by Ab’s strange reaction, but shrugged it off as best he could. “Well, great, thanks. I have everything prepped for tonight already, so maybe I could, er, go now for a bit?”

Ab grunted an affirmative and Harry raced to the stable to grab his copy of *Tweeny Twig*, for whatever good it would do him.

Silence descended on the pub in Harry’s wake. Dalcop finally broke it. “So, boy’s leavin’ then. Kinda, don’ know, surprisin’ that.”

“Mayhap’s fer the best, innit?”, Dung Fletcher ventured cautiously.

Peloother and Nappy Clank both scoffed.

“Get the papers for me, will you Pel,?” Aberforth asked, without even looking up from his *Prophet*, “and don’t you dare ask if I’m sure.”

Pel pulled a surprised face, but nodded. “Sure, Ab, okay.”

Wigol Palter and one of the old women both burst into laughter and gloated as they took bags of gold from two of their scowling companions.

________________________________________________________________________

Harry couldn’t believe he had forgotten just how good holding his wand felt. Burgeoning warmth and gold-gleaming power thrummed through the holly wood, reminding Harry that this feeling was what it meant to a wizard. Leaving his wand behind when he returned to the Head would be hard, he sighed.

Still, he smiled giddily to himself as he got to his feet, *I’ve got the whole afternoon, a wand, and a Forbidden Forest! Magic time!*

He had decided to make a trek into a good-sized clearing in the Forest that he’d never seen frequented by the centaurs or Hagrid. One had to leave the path to get there, and he couldn’t imagine not hearing someone stumbling through the dense, withered thicket that surrounded the area.
As he made to enter the Forest by one of his familiar tracks, hooves suddenly sounded behind him. “Colin?,” he asked, grinning broadly as he turned. *Oh, definitely not a baby death stallion. He must still be somewhere else for the winter.* Rather than his young thestral friend, Harry’s new companion was, of course, Goat, who looked at him blandly as she crunched through the scant remaining snow.

“Want to come with?,” he asked. Goat picked at a fallen pine branch. “Great, then, let’s go.”

Half an hour later the unlikely pair entered the hidden clearing. Harry could barely contain his excitement as he sat on a stump and began thumbing through the text. He’d been surprised to find a few spells that he just might be able to repurpose into offensive ones. Goat began cropping. “This is going to be great!” Harry burbled. “Hey, Goat, it’s your job to let me know if you hear anyone coming, yeah?” He decided to take Goat’s chewing as an affirmative.

Picking out a towering oak with a thick trunk to target as his adversary, Harry readied himself for his first wanded spell in months, the innocuous seeming bread-cutting curse that Tweeny lauded as far better for food than “a simple, plebeian *Diffindo.*” Tweeny’s kind of snob, really. For Harry’s purposes, however, the spell seemed far more valuable than *Diffindo* because there was no counter-curse to block it. *Seriously, who would think to invent a spell that protects bread?* It also wasn’t technically illegal to use the spell on something other than bread – say a person – because again, who would think to do so? Of course, an opponent could perhaps cast a shield which might work, he supposed, but he couldn’t figure out a way that he could test that without a partner. *First let’s just see how this works.* He thrust out his wand with two quick parallel motions and cried, “*Panemseco!*” Warm golden bolts shot out … and fizzled into nothingness against the bark of the tree.

Harry pouted, and tried again. And again. And again.

He flopped down on the forest floor. Goat spared him a glance but offered no wisdom.

*I guess magic can tell that the tree isn’t bread, and so it won’t cut it. Suppose that might be the reason it’s unrestricted and considered innocuous.* He picked morosely at the grass. Sure, he could use *Diffindo* if he needed to, but that was illegal to use on others for the most part, and it was easily blocked. *Dammit, I really thought I was being clever.* Unless … an interesting thought hit him.

*What if it’s not the magic that can tell the tree’s not bread? What if it isn’t working because I’m the one who knows it isn’t bread?* Harry didn’t realize it, but he was floundering into the maelstrom of the greatest magical theory controversies in all the wizarding world. The debate about the role of a wizard’s belief in spell-casting, as well as the possible sentience, or at least perceptive capabilities, of magic had swirled around the upper echelons of wizarding academia since long before Merlin, yet the various camps remained at odds. But the stale debates of cloistered ivory tower-dwellers didn’t matter much to the boy in the Forest.

Harry stood up, his eyes thoughtful. He stared at the tree for several minutes, willing himself to truly believe that he was seeing bread, not bark. His practice at clearing his mind for wandless magic over the last few months helped him focus on this belief entirely.

Finally opening his eyes, he envisioned the trunk as a huge loaf of bread being cut into a dozen perfect pieces and intoned the curse again. “*Panemseco!*” The golden bolts shot out and attached themselves at equal intervals horizontally across the trunk of the tree. There was absolute stillness in the clearing as the golden strands shone on the bark, until Goat rose with a start and galloped out of the clearing.
“Wha–?” was all Harry had time to think before each sliced section of the tree trunk began to slip away from the other parts. High above him, the tree top wavered.

“Oh shit!” Harry stumbled after Goat, hastening to get clear of the towering tree’s path.

A thunderous crash roared through the Forest as the great tree came down. Harry was out of its way, but feared the felled giant would cause other trees to topple. Catching up with a wild-eyed Goat, he threw his body over hers and waited.

Within moments there was silence in the Forest. Harry peeked a shocked eye out from under the arm that shielded his head. Goat bit his other arm hard and he scurried off of her.

“Holy … buggering … shite! I was not – shit, sorry for that Goat, I really am! I didn’t expect that to happen!”

Goat glared.

“Wait here, yeah? I’m just going to check this out.” Harry navigated back into what once had been a clearing but now was filled with the fallen old tree. He noted that its upper portion had taken out a few smaller trees in the distance. Moving closer to its base, he was shocked, and not a little impressed with himself, to see that the massive trunk from the bottom up at least 3 or 4 meters had been neatly divided into perfect, parallel sections that lay as innocuous great circles of wood on the ground. Ever-living fuck, lad! Aberforth’s voice echoed in his mind.

Ever-living fuck indeed.

That is one seriously destructive spell, he marveled before he sobered. But could I actually do that to a person? I once had trouble killing a rabbit, for Merlin’s sake.

The faces of Peter Pettigrew and Voldemort appeared in his mind and his face set in a grim frown.

Yes. I could do that to the right person.

A small, feral smile replaced the frown.

Tweeny Twig, you are my new favorite lady.

He quickly exited the clearing and wrangled Goat to his side. “Well, it’s been a … productive afternoon Goat, but how about we bugger off now? I’m sure the centaurs and others heard that crash and we don’t need to be found, yeah?”

Goat bit him again, though not quite as hard this time. I probably deserve that. The two walked back to the cave so that Harry could return his wand to its hiding place, the boy’s mind whirling with possibilities for turning other unexpected spells into offensive juggernauts.

24 February, 1977

Harry watched from the bar as Quisby lazily used a refilling charm to top off the barflies’ empty pints before heading over to a table filled with his friends, an unpleasant group of young ruffians.

“Pel,” the boy mused softly, “refilling charms just transport liquids held in one container somewhere
nearby to another container, right?”

Peloother looked at him curiously. “‘A course. It’s against Gamp’s law – that’s one of the pesky laws of magic – to actually create food or drink … Though what a paradise it’d be, my young friend, if we could just conjure whiskey!”

This earned a boisterous “Hear, hear” from the regulars.

Harry nodded slowly, his thoughts on tactics to use in future battles with Death Eaters. “Just out of curiosity, what would happen if you cast the charm on, say, a person’s stomach? Or heart? Or brain? Could you make it fill up with some liquid you have nearby, like beer? Or maybe could you make it fill it up with other liquids in their body, like blood, or urine … or whatever?”

Pel stared at him in horror.

“I was just thinking … I’m just curious!,” Harry protested quickly.

“Bloody hell, lad,” Dalcop breathed.

One of the two young werewolves lounging at a nearby table got up and clapped Harry on the back. “Damn, kid, am I glad you don’t have magic!” His companion nodded enthusiastically, his eyes wide.

“So it would work, right Pel?,” Harry pushed, trying to maintain his tone of idle academic interest.

The older man nodded slowly. “I – well – lad.” He shook his head to rouse himself from his inarticulate stupor and looked at Harry with a bit of fear and a lot of pride. “I dare say it would at that.”

2 March, 1977

Quisby was off that day and Aberforth was busy dealing with an early-evening brawl, so Harry took over the bar and found himself carrying a tray of Croatian Bloodwine to a four-top of vampires who sat well out of the way of the windows.

He’d been surprised that most of the Head’s vampiric patrons were a relatively sedate and polite bunch. Granted, they probably knew Ab would chain them to the back garden to await the dawn if they touched Harry, so that might account for their civil dispositions.

As he placed the last glass on the table, he turned a bit nervously to Sanguini, who stopped in regularly enough for Harry to know his name.

“Er, Mr. Sanguini sir? May I ask you a, well, kind of personal question?”

The vampire visibly brightened. “Of course, darling!,” he practically purred, gently stroking Harry’s wrist.

Oh bugger, that definitely came out wrong.

“Oh! Uh, well then,” he cleared his throat awkwardly. “I was just wondering … if a wizard and a vampire got into a fight, what would happen if the wizard transfigured the vampire’s heart to wood?”
The group hissed and Sanguini tightened his grip around Harry’s wrist painfully.

“Oh, or,” Harry floundered, “or if it were a wizard and a werewolf, and the wizard transfigured the werewolf’s blood to silver? I – I – was – er, just wondering, uh, sir!”

Sanguini’s furious eyes flashed with alarm as he pulled Harry so close he was nearly sitting on the vampire’s lap. “I advise you, pretty, to stop wondering such things” he hissed. Harry made to say something – he really wasn’t sure what that was going to be – but Sanguini tightened his grip even more. “No more ‘wondering,’ pretty!”

“Harry! Stop flirting with that petrified bloodsucker and get back to work!,” Ab barked as he reentered the pub.

The vampire let him go and Harry shot to his feet, straightening his clothes. “No more wondering, Mr. Sanguini,” he agreed quietly before retreating to the bar.

Inside, however, he was grinning. I bet that would totally work! Definitely gotta practice wood transfigurations next time I’m in the Forest, though Merlin knows it would tough … silver’s probably way beyond me.

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8 March, 1977

Yarda summoned her purse from across the room and pulled out her bag of coins to settle her tab.

“Uh, pardon me, Ms. Gobermouch, but have you ever wondered if, say you were in a fight with someone else, could you just Accio their lungs or eyeballs of something like that? (*)

The old prostitute stared at him, her eyes wide, before her mouth curled into an ugly sneer. “Shut up, squib.”

Pel shook his head.

“Pel?”


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11 March, 1977

Dalcop cast a quick Scourgify on himself after he’d spilled his beer down his front. Harry thoughtfully watched as the water and bubbles appeared and scoured the fabric, only to disappear when the stain was gone.

“Dalcop, people can cast that spell on other’s people’s mouths, right?” Harry had a faint memory of Mrs. Weasley using it on one of the twins after he’d cursed.

“Sure, boy. Me mum used it on me all the time, she did!”
“Well, what if a person didn’t lift the spell but made it more intense? Could the targeted person drown? Or could you cast internally in a person so that their blood was filled with soap?”

Pel closed his eyes and took a long pull of his drink. Dalcop whistled. “Kid, those werewolves had it right. I don’t wish it on ye, but I’m kinda glad yer a squib!”

Harry laughed and went back to sweeping the floor. *Must figure out a way to test this.*

---

**16 March, 1977**

Aberforth’s *Reparo* neatly stitched the pieces of the broken pint glass back together into seamless perfection. Harry quirked an eyebrow and watched intently.

_I wonder what that spell actually does … Sure, it fixes things, but it’s essentially just putting something back the way the caster thinks it should be…I’ve seen people use it on my glasses, on clothing, on tables, on all sorts of things, so it isn’t targeted to a particular material … What if, say, I cast it at a person’s arm, and truly believed that his arm belonged stuck flush to his body? Would it remake the person that way? Or could I cast it on a person and turn them into a foetus or something like that? That’s just an intact, earlier version of the same object …_

“Hey Ab –” he began.

“Shut it.” Ab relied flatly.

“Huh?”

“You’re goin’ to ask me some crazy disturbin’ question about magic. Don’t.”

“But –”

“Shut it.”

Harry pouted, but added another item to his list of things to try to find a safe way to test.

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**23 March, 1977**

Harry celebrated the first truly spring-like day of the year in a field behind Hogsmeade with fourteen goats. Ab had grunted at him that morning that the goats were getting irascible after being cooped up in the stable for the winter and sent him off for his first day as a goatherd.

Being a goatherd was, Harry concluded, one of the best jobs the Head offered. The huge field where they were wandering had been fully warded by Ab so that the goats couldn’t leave (which left Harry to wonder exactly how Goat had found gotten to him last year), which in turn meant he didn’t have to tax himself chasing after escaping animals. With the exception of Goat, who stayed near his side to crop, and an overly energetic doeling named Chevon who celebrated her freedom by racing up and down the field for hours, the other dozen goats were content to lazily explore interesting things to eat.
Harry hunkered down under a still-leafless tree and surreptitiously pulled out his *Tweeny Twig’s* to read. Maybe it was his desperate circumstances, but the *Guide for Young Domestics* had proved the most inspirational book he had ever read. The pages that the publisher had left blank at the end were now filled with his observations, ideas, and notes for future experimentation.

*I have so much to do.* He’d spent half a year doing next to no magic, and the four years before that, well, not exactly fully applying himself, if he was honest. The war would only get more serious though. He had to try to make himself at least competent.

Once he left the Head and was living on his own again, Harry figured he’d have even more time to work on his magic, though he did have to account for the extra hours spent hunting.

He frowned. Ab still hadn’t told him when his last day would be, and Harry hadn’t asked again. He knew why he hadn’t, of course. Part of him – a really big part – had no desire at all to leave the Head. He liked the people there, the goats, his straw bed.

*But this isn’t about what I want. It’s about what I should do.*

After he finally herded the goats back to the stable in the late afternoon sun, he trudged into the pub and had to fight to keep himself from heaving a great sigh.

“Ab. I need to know exactly when my last day here will be.” He kept his tone level and light, but Ab wouldn’t be able to mistake the firmness of his request.

Ab turned to Pel, who made some small gesture, and then nodded.

The bartender didn’t look at Harry and instead kept wiping a dirty mug out with a filthy towel. “About a week. Let’s make it April first, just to cover any a’ your expenses between now an’ then.”

*Eight more days at the Head. Only eight.* Harry gave a tight-lipped, sad smile. “Great, thanks Ab.”

As he bounded down the stairs to get to work in the kitchen, Ab addressed Pel again. “Everything’ll be set by then?”

“Yeah, probably ready tomorrow or the next day.” Pel looked at the door through which Harry had left. “When ya gonna tell him?”

“Tell ‘im wha?,’” Dung slurred, opening a bleary eye.

“Never you mind!,” Ab barked. “Never any of you mind business that ain’t yours!”

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**28 March, 1977**

Harry dropped onto his bed and immediately fell asleep after a long, lovely Saturday. Hagrid had dropped in for lunch, and somehow successfully convinced both Aberforth and Harry to let the latter accompany him back to the Hogwarts grounds to meet some of his more interesting pets.

*Can’t believe Hagrid wasn’t in Slytherin,* Harry had thought to himself. The combination of earnest entreaties and dog-eyed pouts had constituted some of the best manipulation he’d seen in some time.
Given his place of employment, that was saying something.

Spending time in Hagrid’s hut was like time-traveling all over again. Fang wasn’t there, but Stimpy, another massive boar-hound who patrolled the room looking for scraps and covering every surface with a generous coating of drool, more than made up for Fang’s absence. Harry drank bitter tea and ate tooth-cracking rock cakes, all the while expecting Ron and Hermione to burst through the door grousing about Malfoy or homework. Afterwards Harry was reunited with a much taller Colin, whom he was delighted to find had indeed been sheltered for the winter with the other thestrals in a small stable just inside the Hogwarts part of the Forest. Though now fast approaching being a true adolescent death stallion, Colin proved just as thrilled to see Harry as ever and rewarded his caresses with rumbling purrs. The thestral whom Harry was sure was Colin’s mum even gifted him with another tingly lick of his face.

Harry had regretfully left the grounds in late afternoon and hurried back to the Head to help make dinner. The pub had been fairly bustling that night – it seemed that all the degenerates in the area had decided to take the night off cooking – and Harry had worked furiously until his 9 pm curfew.

It had been a good, busy day.

29 March, 1977

A sudden, terrible weight on his chest that left him gasping for air woke Harry a few hours before dawn.

His eyes snapped open to focus immediately on the wand pointed in his face, before noting the black mustache and cruel blue eyes that twinkled malevolently at him.

“Well, hello again, little squib,” the giant man sitting on his chest whispered, specks of spittle flying from his lips. “Miss me?” Before Harry could do anything, Walden Macnair’s left hand reared back and then punched him fully in the face.

Harry didn’t even have the time to mentally curse before he fell into blackness.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and for all your comments!
People Who Need a Good Killin'

Chapter Notes

Warning: violence and torture

VII. People Who Need A Good Killin’

29 March, 1977

Harry slowly came back to himself thanks to the throbbing pain in his face. Without opening his eyes, he gingerly raised a hand to his cheek, and his breath quickened as he felt flesh that was so misshapen it didn’t seem to be his own. His right cheek was just all wrong, and his experimental opening of his eyes confirmed that, yes, it rather did feel like someone was stabbing them.

His brain suddenly sent him a blaring reminder that Macnair had been in his bedroom of all places and had attacked him. Opening his eyes quickly – ouch! Too quickly! – he realized that the hand he’d raised to inspect the damage to his face was shackled to his other hand, and that the two together were attached to chain running through an iron rung in the floor. So, definitely not still in the Head. But why? Why would anyone want to –

A sudden chill ran through him. No one knows who I am here! Oh God. Oh God.

He forced himself to steady his breathing and admit that yes, he was terrified, but that he’d also been in worse situations before.

Looking around the cramped room which currently imprisoned him gave away no clues as to his location. He didn’t have his glasses, which he forced himself not to be concerned about, but there wasn’t really anything to see. The room was little more than a small store closet with gray stone floors, walls, and ceiling. Ancient rotted wooden shelves lined one wall, but all were completely empty. The ceiling was quite high, at least 3 and half meters, and near the very top ran a line of long narrow windows which provided weak chinks of the pinkish light cast by a rising sun. There was no way he could get up to them, let alone fit through them, but at least the light implied that he was above ground.

Unless this place is like Wigol’s and the windows are charmed.

I can’t trust anything I see.

That thought was punctuated when his vision suddenly slurred sideways before blurring almost completely.

Wow. I really am hurt. Okay, don’t panic.

Several minutes of blinking later, Harry could almost focus clearly again.
Opposite the wall with the windows was a doorway-shaped opening, but the door had been removed. Instead, thick iron bars complete with a formidable lock shut him in the room like a medieval prison. Beyond the bars he could see a long, empty hallway made from the same stone as his room. There was a lone torch some distance down it, whose fire glinted off two somethings on opposite walls that might be brass door handles. Beyond that was darkness.

Okay. What do I know?

I know Macnair’s probably the one who captured me. I know my head is injured but the rest of me seems okay. I’m chained up, and I haven’t managed a wandless Alohomora yet, so I’ll have to wait for someone to unlock the cuffs and room.

He paused and thought hard. Why would Macnair want me? Is this really just because of one fight? …

I know Macnair doesn’t want me dead yet. He would have killed me in the stable at once if that were the case.

He shook a bit. So I know he or someone else will be coming back and that they probably don’t mean to do nice things to me.

And then he came to the part his mind had been avoiding.

I know that Ab would have felt when the wards on the stable were disturbed. He’s got that place locked down tighter than Hogwarts to protect his goats. So he might be coming for me. He paused, a niggling voice wondering if Ab would really try to rescue him. Yeah. If he can come, if he can find me, he’ll come. It’s dawn now, so I can’t have been taken more than a few hours ago at most.

Or Ab might be captured and here with me. Macnair might have gotten him first. This made sense to Harry, though he really wished it didn’t. Any experienced wizard who concentrated would have been able to feel the wards on the stable. Why start with Harry when a fully capable wizard who’d easily perceive his intrusion was a few short flights of stairs away?

Or he might be de –

No. Don’t think of that.

I can’t plan based on what may or may not have happened to Ab. He closed his eyes and took another long, fortifying breath.

“Well done keeping yourself together, little squib,” a harsh voice mocked. “Though, tsk, tsk, you’ve spilled your defective blood all over my floor!” Harry opened his eyes to see Macnair leaning against the gate, his arms languidly draping through the bars, one hand fingering his wand. He mentally cursed himself for not even noticing the man’s approach. “Perhaps I’ll make you lick it up.” Macnair smiled and showed far too many teeth.

Harry swallowed hard and couldn’t bring himself to say anything. He considered using an Accio to take Macnair’s wand, but there was no guarantee that the wand would even work for him at all, and then he’d still be locked in a cell with a useless wand and lose the element of surprise that his limited wandless magic granted him.

“Cat got your tongue, squib?” Macnair’s grin got impossibly wider. “Ah, you’re going to be so much
fun!” With that he unhooked a key ring from his belt and unlocked the door before securely latching the ring back to his belt loop. Catching Harry’s widening eyes, he smirked, “Just a muggle lock on this door and your chains. Freaks like you don’t even deserve magic to keep you penned in!”

Oh thank you, thank you. If there’s no magic on the doors, this helps. He mentally frowned. But can I use Accio on the keys if they’re hooked to his belt – shite, I probably can’t without bringing Macnair along for the ride …

But now was definitely not the right time to try to nab the keys. Macnair kept his eyes firmly on Harry, smiling with relish.

“We’re going to hurt you boy,” he stated baldly. So there’s more than one of them. “We’re going to make you squeal like a piglet.” Macnair moved in close to him and grasped his chin. “By the time we’re through with you, you’ll beg for death. And if we’re feeling merciful, we’ll give it to you.”

Harry nearly coughed out a delirious giggle. Oh God, is this seriously happening? Isn’t that last bit almost exactly what Voldemort said to me last year? These guys are so –, they’re just so –, they’re all so unimaginative. The thought was strangely comforting.

“So!” Macnair’s voice was brisk and bright as he straightened up in front of Harry’s prone form. “As you’re a guest, I’ll even let you have some choice!” In his right hand he flourished his wand, while he pulled a long, wickedly sharp dagger from his belt with his left hand. Holding both weapons before Harry, he asked with mocking good cheer, “So, little squib, which shall it be? Magic … or … Muggle?” Holding the wand and knife up alternatively in a sort of mocking dance, he chanted “Magic … or … Muggle?” over and over.

Of course, there was no right choice. Whatever Harry said, he was sure that Macnair already knew exactly what he was going to do to him. He again said nothing, weighing the options of trying to use Depulso to knock the Death Eater against the wall as hard as he could.

But there’s others here … they might come running if I make too much noise and I don’t think the chain will reach to the wall, so I won’t be able to get the ke –

Without warning Macnair was suddenly pressed up against him, smiling into his face, and sudden, agonizing pain bloomed in his right shoulder. “Too late, I choose!” The man’s spittle flecked onto Harry’s face.

Macnair was off of him as quickly as he had come, the dagger in his left hand dripping blood onto the floor.

My blood. That’s my blood.

Harry cast dazed eyes down at his body and saw a dark stain rapidly soaking the brown of his tee shirt at his shoulder. The back of his shirt felt wet as well. Holy shit, he stabbed me all the way through!

He must have let his surprise at the sudden injury show. Macnair giggled. “Oh, not to worry, squib, it’s just a little cut. I made sure not to hit anything too important. Can’t have you bleeding out your worthless life too soon, can we? In fact,” he brandished is wand and cast a spell at Harry’s shoulder that hurt much more than the initial stab had, “there you go! You wouldn’t know it, of course, but that’s a blood clotting spell. You. Are. Welcome!” he exclaimed with a florid bow. The spell did nothing for the pain or the internal damage, but Harry did feel the rush of blood abruptly begin to
slow. “Now,” he affected a puzzled look and tapped his lips with his wand, “what shall we do next?”

*I … I have to get the keys and his wand. Can I even do wandless magic with a fouled-up shoulder and whatever’s wrong with my head? This bastard, though, he’s just bloody fast.*

He had thought he would have more time before he had to fight for his life again, and all the spells he’d been working on, for all their macabre creativity and innovation, still required a wand that was buried under leaves in a cave.

“He daaar, Walden!,” another male voice called from somewhere down the hallway. “Old man’s starting to stir!”

Macnair’s predatory grin faltered a bit. “Oh, too bad! We were just getting started! But you’re just the pudding, little squib. The old man’s the main course. Ta for now!” He turned and walked out of the room.

“Wait!” Harry’s resolve to keep silent crumbled. “Wait, you mean Aberforth’s here?,” he cried, more desperately than he would have liked.

Macnair winked at him as he locked the door and reattached the keys to his belt. Without a word he sauntered down the hallway, whistling a jaunty tune.

*I have to get out of here. I have to get to Ab.* Harry didn’t know why the Death Eaters were after Aberforth, but it sounded like he was hurt and had been unconscious. Of course he was Dumbledore’s brother, but Harry’d never seen him do any wandless magic. He’d be helpless in there.

Okay. There’s nothing for it. I can do this.

Harry closed his eyes. He focused on the lock on his shackles first, envisioning the little gears moving, the arm unlatching. “Alohomora,” he whispered, sending the spell into the metal, willing it to do what he needed.

Nothing.

He tried again.

Nothing.

He tried again.

Nothing.

The delicate metal elements in the lock were just too delicate. The two spells he’d been practicing wandless for months used magic like a strongman used a mallet. Accio and Depulso were all about high-power and brute force. This task called for control, for finesse. Harry could admit he’d never really been one for either.

Seconds passed into minutes (“Alohomora”), minutes dragged on (“Alohomora”), and Harry’s sweat began to drip down his face and soak through his shirt (“Alohamora”). His head began to sway (“Lohamora”), his mind became dizzy (“Alomora”), and his hands started to shake
uncontrollably (“Lomra”).

It was too much. Every cell in his body felt drained, and the magic was coming out weaker every time he attempted to command his lolling tongue to cast the charm. He simply hadn’t had enough time to train his body to do the spell, and his injuries exacerbated the situation.

Stop. There’s no point. I’m just exhausting myself. Rest, and when Macnair comes back, try to Accio the keys and hope for the best.

Dazed and trying hard not to hate himself for his failure, he sat back against the stone and watched the chinks of sunlight that struck the wall. Time passed slowly, the feeble streaks ever-so-gradually changing their tones and shadows as the sun moved across the sky. It felt like hours since Macnair had stabbed him, hours since he left to go to Ab. Would he even come back before he kills Ab? The thought repeated itself in his mind like it was being played on a loop, punctuated by a simple prayer. Please. Please. Please.

Harry slipped into a wakeful half-doze, aware of his surroundings but asleep enough to let his exhausted mind and magic begin to revive.

Then a shriek sounded in the silence. A mindless, bestial call of pure pain that shocked Harry out of his reverie and sent what felt like jolts of electricity into his bloodstream.

Fuck Alohomora. I’m done with this shit. Brute force it is.

Harry focused his mind and gathered his frayed but rallying magic. He’d never even considered trying this particular spell wandless. Others had just seemed more useful, and maybe they were but for his bad luck. Just pure thought aimed at a single purpose, Peloother had said, and Harry believed him. I know the spell I need. I know what I need it to do. I know what I need it to avoid doing. With those three thoughts held in his head like a perfect, unified sphere of purpose, Harry snapped open his eyes and snarled at the chain which connected the cuffs together and to the floor.

“Reducto!”

Oh God, that wasn’t enough.

Harry felt a lead weight sink into his chest as he looked at the results of his pathetically feeble spell. True, he was thrilled he hadn’t blown his hands clean off, but the chain that connected the two cuffs was still intact. However … one or two of the links that attached the chain to the floor had, he realized, crumbled to dust.

Okay. That wasn’t … wasn’t much. But this is better. I still don’t have great range of motion with my hands, but at least now I’m not attached to the bloody floor.

He sat down hard, chest heaving.

Okay. Catch my breath for a minute, then figure out what to do next. I have to get to Ab.

He reached up to massage his right shoulder when his hand brushed against his sleeve. A sudden chill ran through him and his hair stood on end.
Rolling up his shirt, he gaped at his knife, still strapped securely to his arm as Ab had always insisted it be. Avoiding his own embarrassment at the fact he didn’t even notice its presence or think to look, he had to shake his head, bewildered by the stupidity of his captors. *They seriously didn’t even search me? They really must not think I’m a threat at all.* (*)

A small smile played on his lips. People who don’t expect much are easier to surprise; he’d seen enough barfights at the Head to learn that lesson very well.

Sudden footsteps sounded down the hall along with a muffled voice that was probably Macnair’s. “Lemme know when he wakes up again.” The footsteps grew louder.

*Ab’s still alive.*

*And Macnair’s coming back here. With the keys.*

Silently arranging his body so that Macnair wouldn’t notice that he was no longer chained to the floor, he laid against the wall, his head lolling to the side as if he were terribly weakened or asleep. Harry still didn’t feel he had the strength to do any magic and tried to clamp down on his panic. *He doesn’t expect my knife, or that I’m halfway free. And I don’t need my hands to be unchained to hurt him with my knife.*

A dull scraping sound accompanied the footsteps, and another whistled melody. *He’s dragging his knife across the stone wall as he walks.*

“Hello again, my little friend! Wake up, wake up!” The key clicked in the lock, the gate opened, and was swiftly closed.

Harry opened his eyes. Macnair was leaning against the gated door, knife out, wand stowed, keys attached to his belt again. He was too far away for Harry to do anything. After all, he’d never been trained in knife-fighting, or even hand-to-hand combat. He mentally shook his head. *Honestly, the extent of my knowledge is “stab him with the pointy end.”* Starting anything with Macnair when he was that far away was a recipe for getting killed. *Get him closer to you.* A plan began to form. *Deep breath. Be bold.*

“I admire your bravery, Mr. Macnair.”

The Death Eater’s manic grin faltered and he gaped for a second before recovering. “Why, whatever do you mean?”

“Or maybe it’s your master’s bravery … It’s really, I dunno, inspirational to see him stand up to his fear like this, regardless of the consequences.”

*Rope him in.* Harry’s calm inner voice drowned out the other, more terrified ones that kept screaming at him to *shut it, you bloody fool, for Merlin’s sake!*

Macnair chuckled strangely. “I think I must have hit you harder than I thought.”

“Well, what else could he have expected, attacking Aberforth like this, other than a confrontation that he really might not win?”
Macnair took a half step forward and dropped all pretense. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Here we go. “Well, everyone knows that Dumbledore is the one wizard Voldemort fears. Why else hasn’t he attacked Hogwarts?” Thank you, Tom Riddle’s diary.

“You dare say his name? You filthy squib!” Macnair’s eyes grew wild.

Harry couldn’t stop his mirthless laugh. “Seriously, that’s what you focus on?”

Macnair shook his head as if to clear it. “What does any of this have to with Dumbledore?” The man seemed honestly puzzled.

It was Harry’s turn to gape. Does he really not know? Is that even possible? “Well, I don’t think Dumbledore will look kindly on your master for attacking his little brother’s home and business. And kidnapping? Torture? No, the Headmaster won’t be as forgiving as he normally is, I expect.”

Macnair turned white and stood very still.

Harry gave him a searching look. Holy buggering shite. He really didn’t know. “Why, Mr. Macnair, I’m shocked. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you didn’t know that Albus Dumbledore is Aberforth’s devoted big brother!”

“You’re lying.” Macnair’s voice was almost small.

Got you.

“I’m not,” Harry said simply.

The Death Eater stared at him in dawning horror.

A shrewd idea occurred to Harry. “This mission of yours – the reason you took my friend – Voldemort didn’t actually give it to you, did he? You and your friends came up with it on your own … What? Did you want to try to impress him or something?”

Macnair’s fists clenched and unclenched.

Harry bit back an incredulous laugh. “Oh my God, that’s it, isn’t it? You did all this for whatever reason, and now you’ve pitted your own boss square against his greatest enemy, who’ll look for vengeance for his brother’s sake.”

The man’s eyes were bulging.

So close. He’s going to lose it.

“Damn, Walden, you poor, poor bastard. From what I’ve heard, your master isn’t too forgiving of mistakes. You really are fucked either way, aren’t you?”

“You’re just a squib,” the man whispered.

Harry shrugged, ignoring the agony in his shoulder. “You’ve set yourself up as an enemy to Dumbledore and a failure to your master. Me being a squib doesn’t change the fact that you’re humped no matter what happens.”
And that did it. Now or never.

Please.

Macnair rushed at Harry in a blind rage, knife in hand but seemingly forgotten in his primal desire to pummel Harry to death. Harry twisted his wrist just so to activate his holster, snapped into a defensive posture, and met the man head on. They ended in a parody of an embrace, Harry’s nose on the man’s heaving chest, Macnair’s chin in his hair. Stepping back quickly, Harry saw his hand still grasping the knife that was embedded in Macnair’s chest.

Walden Macnair stared down at himself with a look just as surprised as Harry’s before clumsily moving to grab the knife from his chest.

Harry was faster. He pulled the knife out of the man, ignoring the spray of blood that came with it, and planted the blade again in the other side of Macnair’s torso. His mind was nearly blank, going about the gruesome task with just one all-encompassing thought. Fall down. He pulled the knife out and stabbed the man again quickly. Fall down. And again. Fall down! And again.

Macnair fell, bleeding his life out over the stone floors, writhing and kicking with weakening legs.

Stop moving, Harry’s mind ordered dumbly. He stabbed again. Stop moving. He stabbed again. Stop moving, dammit! He stabbed again.

Macnair stopped moving.

Breathing heavily, Harry stared down at the grisly remains of what had been Walden Macnair.

I killed, I killed him. Oh God. I killed him. I’m – I’m going to lose it. His mind admitted in a very quiet voice. Ab’s voice barked back in response. Not until the job’s done, lad.

Harry stood on the spot, willing himself not to go weak in the knees as his adrenaline ebbed. Eventually, he nodded slowly and wiped his soaked blade and trembling hand on a clean bit of Macnair’s robes. “Okay, Ab.” He stood up. “Okay.”

Harry grabbed the keys from Macnair’s belt, determinedly not noticing that they were slick with his blood, and made short work of the lock on his cuffs. Rifling through the body for the man’s wand, his little thrill of hope fizzled after he tried a few spells with the long, curved wand. It was a like a dead twig in his hand. With a sharp twist he snapped the wand in two and discarded it in the cell.

Seconds later he had unlocked the door and was moving down the hallway on silent feet.

He slowed at the door he was fairly certain Macnair had come from earlier and put an ear against the wood. The voice inside was faint and had a continental accent, but its words were clear enough, “– good, you’re waking up. Now, let’s get back to our discussion about policies for checking such devices out of the department, shall we? Remind me who –” Harry broke away from the door,
thinking hard. The man seemed to be interrogating Ab. If this room was anything like his cell, Ab would be against the far wall, and the man’s back would likely be turned to the door.

What the hell am I playing at, trying to strategize? I’ve got no idea what this room looks like! In the end I’m just going to enter it ready for a fight anyway, so I might as well get on with it.

Fair enough, Harry conceded to himself, adrenaline coursing through him anew.

He grasped the handle and was shocked to find it unlocked. As slowly as he could, he opened the door and slipped inside of what appeared to be some sort of potions lab.

A middle-aged man with a long braid of brown hair was sitting in a chair with his back to the door, interrogating a pile of robes sprawled on the ground in front of a long wooden counter, grey hair spread around them in a messy fan. Oh God, Ab.

He quickly concocted a wonderful plan. He’d slip behind the man and hit him over the head with one of the heavy cauldrons scattered around on tables.

Easy.

He had not planned, however, on the presence of a discarded potions bottle on the floor. Before he’d made it four steps into the room his foot hit the glass and sent it under a table. The consequent clink might as well have been a gunshot. Oh dear fuck.

The Death Eater shot up, wand out, and Harry had no time to hesitate. Without pausing to deliberate whether or not he could do it, he summoned the large iron cauldron bubbling on the counter directly behind the man, praying that his magic and muscle memory could make up for his exhaustion. The cauldron zoomed like his Firebolt once had directly into the back of the man’s head with a solid crunch.

Barely even registering the unconscious (dead?) man on the floor, Harry rushed over to his prone friend. He was mumbling strangely and obviously injured. As gently as he could, Harry helped him into a sitting position, back against the wood of the counter so that he could assess the damage.

The man was bleeding from several wounds, but nothing looked life threatening. His hands, however, shook fiercely as they tried to touch his face.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you, he’s out cold or dead, I dunno. It’s okay,” Harry looked up into the man’s face.

His eyes widened.

“Pel??”

Pelother Pepst, of all people, was here? Who in the world would want to kidnap and interrogate Pel? He was harmless!

“Wea-wan, muh, my young friend?”
Harry was still reeling from finding Pel rather than Ab and shook his head stupidly. “I don’t have a wand.”

“No! Geh-get h-his!”

**Oh.** Harry scrambled over to the fallen man and snatched the wand from where it had fallen by his side.

Pel stowed it in his robes rather than keeping it ready in his hands.

“Okay, let’s get you out of here and find Ab.” Harry gave him a strange look. “Keep the wand out, Pel.”

*Why is he shaking his head? Why isn’t he moving? Please, Pel, we have to move!*”

The older man found his voice. “Ab’s n – n – not here. They left him in the p – pub an’ took me. I don’t know, I don’t know if he’s okay, Harry. Wuh – w – wasn’t movin’.”

“So wait, it’s just us here? Well, fuck, let’s go, Pel!”

Pel was still shaking his head as he held out his arms. They were clad in thick silver bracelets covered in runes. Unlike Harry’s shackles had been, there was no chain. “Puh – Pan – Panoptica cuffs. Know ‘em?” At Harry’s blank look, he continued. “Magic inhib – inhibitors an’ sort of like an invisible prison. Cuh – Can’t do magic or move much from this spot until those who put ‘em on either let me go or take ‘em off willingly. Or if they duh – die.”

*Well fuck.*

“Okay. Who put them on you?”

“F – Folteren,” Pel motioned to the man on the floor, “and Unsonsy.”

*There’s a third man here still.* Harry swallowed the knot in his throat. “So they both have to die?”

Pel nodded slowly “Or – or be puh-persuaded to take ‘em off.”

“And you can’t really move much?”

Another nod.

“Okay then.”

Pel’s eyes widened and he seemed to rally from the effects of the torture. “No! Bluh – bloody hell, Harry, just get out of here. Macnair’s just left – he could come back any –”

“He’s dead already,” Harry said in a dull voice.

Pel stared at him for a few seconds. “Lad, just get –” Pel’s voice petered out as Harry had already crossed the room and drawn his knife, gazing down at the unmoving form of the man named Folteren. Slowly he bent over and felt for a pulse.

*Shit. He’s still alive.*
We could try to persuade him. Him and the other guy to take the cuffs off.

“Harry –,” Pel began again.

Harry looked over at him, eyes distant and deadly calm. In his mind’s eye, Peter Pettigrew stood before him, cringing and wheezing and sniveling for his life. Harry had been merciful that night in the Shrieking Shack, whether out of real pity, a desire to emulate his ideal image of James, or because he’d been scared to be involved in a man’s death, he didn’t really know for sure. But he had spared Pettigrew.

And look where that got us.

They’ll try to kill us the moment they can if we try to talk them into releasing Pel.

He shook his head slowly, feeling like he was suddenly in the eye of a great windstorm, at the single time and place when the deadly blasts were lulled into stillness.

“Sometimes people just need a good killin’, Pel. There’s isn’t anything else for it.”

With that Harry bent over and slit the man’s throat with a hand that did not shake.

The man never woke up to realize he was dying.

There was much more blood than Harry had expected.

This isn’t … this is horrible, he mused sickly before Ab’s voice broke through his haze. Job’s not done yet, boy.

Straightening, Harry staved off another impending meltdown. “Pel? Pel!” The man was looking at him with wide eyes. “Pel, I need to know if there were more than three of them. I’ve got to find this Unsonsy guy so I can get you out, but are there any others?”

“No, I – I don’t think so. I never saw more than the three of them.”

“Okay, you stay here.” Harry crouched in front of Pel again. “I’ll have to go and see if I can find –”

“Harry!” Pel’s face went rigid with alarm.

Before Harry could even fully turn back towards the door, a voice rang out. “Lacero!”

What felt like a tongue of white-hot pain slashed Harry across his left side even as he dodged part of the spell.

And that was the side of my shirt that wasn’t as bloody, he thought deliriously as he rolled on the floor, hoping to get out of the way or … well he wasn’t sure what he was going to do.

And it didn’t matter. Harry had just enough time to take in a glimpse of his attacker – a young man who couldn’t be more than twenty one or twenty two and whose eyes were wide and desperate at being involved in an unexpected confrontation – before he heard the man bark out a shocked “Crucio!”
Every nerve in Harry’s body suddenly screamed in pain with the burning sting of thousands of knives searing into him. He felt himself falling from his crouch to the floor at Pel’s feet. He might be screaming, he wondered through the haze of pain.

*But.*

*But,* the voice of an unknown man broke through, slipped in over and under and beyond the pain, its tone calm and clear. *But Voldemort’s Cruciatus was way worse than this. This is bad … But it’s not so bad really.*

Suddenly the pain flickered out and Harry realized his attacker had lifted the spell. *Job’s not done yet.* Every fiber of his body screamed against it, but Harry slowly stood up, somehow keeping his limbs from shaking too much, and faced down the man who had just tortured him.

Unsonsy, Harry guessed, had looked exhilarated by his casting of the curse when Harry had first turned round to rise, but the manic smile slipped off his face as his opponent pulled himself up and glared at him. He idly noticed that the man had closed the door, penning himself in the room as well as them. *I just need a moment to right myself. I can do this.*

The young man’s nervousness evaporated a bit when Harry just glared and did not attack. He didn’t give Harry his moment.

“*Imperio!*” Harry had a half second to concede that the kid wasn’t pulling any punches before a wonderful calm filled his mind. *Kill the old man. Kill the old man. Kill the old man.* It was a nice feeling, Harry could admit, quite comforting after the shite day he’d had, but the clear voice he’d heard in his mind moments ago wasn’t fooled.

He smashed down the urge to shake from the after-effects of the torture curse with the force of pure, desperate adrenaline and incredulous fury.

Instead he looked at Unsonsy with a bitter smile. “Yeah, that’s not going to work. I was able to break through Riddle’s own *Imperius* when I was fourteen. You’ve never even cast it before, have you?” Harry asked. “See, you’ve got to really mean it, y’ know?”

The young man’s mouth hung open. “But I – you … ?”

*Please work,* Harry sent out a silent, simple prayer to whomever might be listening.

When he thought about his actions much later, Harry would cringe that he hadn’t just decided to banish the man into the wood of the door or stone of the wall. *I guess my instincts are much more … explosive,* he would admit to himself. *And maybe a little self-destructive …*

His fist shot out in a furious gesture of command as he focused on his target and what he needed the spell to do. “*ACCIO DOOR!*”

The thick oak door behind Unsonsy strained with a great creaking against the metal hinges that bolted it fast to the wall. But the force of Harry’s spell could not be denied either. Horrible shrieks of splitting wood filled the room as the center of the door, unencumbered by hinges, exploded inwards into dozens of sharp wooden pieces and hundreds of splinters, many of which shot into Unsonsy’s back so hard that their ends poked through his chest. While his enemy blocked the worst of the shrapnel from Harry, he didn’t stop it all, and Harry found himself suddenly on the floor with dozens of splinters embedded in his arms and his left leg. *Oh. Ouch.*
“That’s … those are really good hinges,” Harry muttered blankly, noting that summoning closed doors to oneself, thinking that they would fly over and just knock an enemy out, was a really stupid idea.

And then Pel was there, wielding a dead man’s wand in hands no longer constrained by the Panoptica cuffs. With an idle, if somewhat shaky, flick, the manacles on Harry’s own wrists dissolved into dust and Pel started muttering healing charms on the young man’s lacerated shoulder and punctured limbs.

“I’ve always been shuh-shit at these, my friend, but I can do enough so that you don’t bleed to death and can walk.” Harry nodded absently and laid back. A slight turn of his head and he was staring into Unsonsy’s sightless eyes.

*Oh God. He saw me. Pel saw me.*

“Pel!” Harry turned back to the man who was sloppily patching up his left arm. “Pel, you can’t tell, please don’t tell!”

The man paused in his ministrations and looked at him with hard eyes. “T-tell what, lad? That you’re no more a squib than I am?”

Panic welled in Harry. He hadn’t been this scared in the cell with Macnair. “Please, Pel! I – I promise I’ll explain,” there’s no way he was getting out of that, he knew, “but people can’t know. I swear I’ll explain as soon as we’re safe, but please don’t tell!”

“Tell what, lad?,” a completely different voice intruded. Pel and Harry both started violently, the former’s wand moving towards the door.

“What the ever-living-fuck kind of mess have you two gotten yourselves into?” Aberforth asked, eyeing the destroyed room, his prone friends, and the two corpses.
29 March, 1977 (early morning)

Ab rustled himself awake as the morning sun was just beginning its doomed attempt to break through the dark curtains that covered the Head’s windows. Puzzled and a bit embarrassed, he looked around. It had been years since he’d been drunk enough to pass out on his pub’s floor …

A slick of liquid from a broken bottle ran down the floor under one of his chest. Mind groggy, he wondered if he had tripped.

He pulled himself to his feet, wincing at the aches and pains shooting through him – *way to old for his shite* – and grasped his wand. Memories immediately slammed into him. Him and Pel at the bar talking about the boy until long after the pub had closed. Macnair, that bastard Dutchman Folteren, and some mouth-breathing whelp bursting in, wands out, spells flying. *How the fuck did they get past my wards?*

Sure, he’d gotten a few licks in, he suddenly recalled, but the bastards had the element of surprise. Pel was drunk, as he always was by that time of the night, and went down fast. In the absence of any spell damage to his body, Ab figured he must have gotten clipped by a stunner.

His eyes narrowed. He knew what it meant that his memories returned only when he’d held his wand. When he had started using the Head to spy on the bloody Walpurgis Knights, Albus had insisted that he charm the thing with an obliviation failsafe his brother had devised. Anyone tried to obliviate Ab in *his* bar, and the spell would fail as soon as he touched his wand.

*The boy.* Ab concentrated. He could hear Macnair’s soothing voice in his head as he obliviated him. “When you wake up, you’ll think you tripped. You won’t remember us, or Pepst being here. You’ll think your little squib has finally run away.”

That was it then.

They’d taken Pel and the boy.

The chill that shrieked through his bones had nothing to do with his age.

Ignoring the various aches that pled for his attention, Ab hitched up his robes and ran to the stable to confirm the boy’s absence, just in case. No boy there, linens folded up neatly. *Oh fuck.*

He didn’t have to wonder why Macnair would take the kid. The bastard would never stop smarting over the very public thrashing the kid had given him.

*But,* he surmised, *but they really came for Pel. Had to have. The boy was just a bonus.* It was obvious to Ab, even if not to most other people, why Voldemort and his cronies would be interested in the old fool. Time was when Peloother Protem Pepst had been the head solicitor and legal counsel
for the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries, before he became disillusioned with them, washed up, and began drinking his life away. Pel was a man who knew secrets, a lot of them about a lot of people and magics, the sorts of secrets which a nascent Dark Lord might find it useful to know.

Fuck.

_They’ll keep Pel alive for awhile. Need to bleed him dry of all he knows. And … and Macnair’s a sadistic fuck. He’ll want to take his time killing the boy._

_They’re still alive._ Certainty flooded Ab, and with that certainty came clear knowledge of where he needed to go and what he needed to do. Dashing to the kitchen, he dropped nearly his entire store of various healing potions into a bag, secured his knife to his person, and grabbed a dark cloak on his way out the door.

A short apparition trip later and he was at an unassuming, nearly-unknown bronzed gate to the Hogwarts grounds. Thinking of Ariana, whose smiling face slowly morphed into a green-eyed, black-haired string of a boy, he incanted his patronus.

“Go ‘n find my shit of a brother. Tell ‘im I’m here and need to come up. It’s an emergency.”

With a small nod of her silvery head, his goat patronus raced through the air on graceful legs and disappeared out of sight.

Ab shook his head with familiar irritation. _Bloody annoying that it was Albus who came up with that messenger patronus. Damn fine spell, that._

A moment later the magic on the gate dispelled. _Smarry, self-righteous bastard’s never gonna let me forget this._ He rolled his eyes and stepped through the secret gate directly into the office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Albus looked up from his desk with concerned eyes as Aberforth stalked in. “What has –”

“Three Death Eaters attacked the pub a few hours before dawn,” Ab said without preamble. “Knocked me out, tried to obliviate me. Took Pel Pepst. And the boy. I just came to.”

His brother frowned deeply. “They shouldn’t have been able to get past your wards, should they?”

“Of course not, least not without me even noticin’ it! I had the ones I use after closing up, as well as the permanent ones on the stable.”

Albus’ frown deepened. “And all they did to you was stun and attempt to obliviate you, yes?” Ab hissed impatiently as he nodded. “Curious … what did they try to make you believe had happened?”

“That I fell, Pel hadn’t been there that night, and that the boy ran away.”
“Very curious …” The headmaster sat back in his chair, a somber expression on his face. “I am truly sorry, Aberforth, for the loss of your friend and the child. However, their behavior suggests that the Death Eaters, and by extension Voldemort himself, remain unsuspicious of your allegiances. Perhaps the Hog’s Head is not as compromised as I had feared.”

“Well that’s bloody lovely, but what about Pel and Harry?” Ab demanded. “They’re still alive, dammit!”

“Oh, Aberforth, I – oh I am sorry, but I sincerely doubt –”

Ab slammed his fist on Albus’ desk. Fawkes, who had been asleep in the corner, startled awake with an indignant squawk. “One of the Death Eaters was Macnair. He’ll want to play with his food before he eats it, you know that. As for Pel, Merlin, Albus, go ahead an’ play the heartless general if you like, but even you have to admit that Pel’s knowledge in the hands of Death Eaters is incredibly dangerous! Dammit, don’t be a fool, here!”

Albus looked stricken and puzzled. “Pel Pepst … Peloother Pepst, yes? I do recognize the name from somewhere …”

“Course you barely remember him,” Ab snorted, “probably never gave him a second thought after he lost his shine.” He waved off his brother’s protest. “Pel was the head legal counsel for the Unspeakables for years, dammit! Just imagine what he knows!”

Albus paled. “Oh, of course! Oh my, this is concerning,” he conceded softly. “I remember him now. Brilliant, but brash and unpredictable, yes?,” the headmaster mused. “Those with the best of Ravenclaw’s qualities and the worst of Gryffindor’s too often experience … problems out in the world.”

“Spare me your sermons,” Ab snarled. “You see the problem, martial up your Order and let’s start plannin’!”

“But,” Albus continued slowly, “forgive my lapse in memory of the details, but didn’t Mr. Pepst, ah, leave the employ of the Unspeakables in the early 1960s or so?” Aberforth nodded sharply, and Albus sighed. “Aberforth, I agree that Mr. Pepst’s knowledge does pose a danger if divulged to the wrong people, but much of it is now out of date. Much has changed throughout the Ministry since then. His knowledge of policies, artifacts, individuals with various security clearances – all of that – can only be of limited use to Voldemort.”

Aberforth stared at his brother for a long minute.

Fawkes crooned softly in the background as the air between the brothers grew stale and bitter.

“You don’t mean to do anythin’ about this, do you?”

When Albus looked back at him, there was no twinkle in his eyes. “No. No, Ab. I truly am sorry, I am, but I cannot risk the Order to save an old man with a bit of potentially dangerous knowledge and a single boy, even an innocent one.”

“It’s the right thing to do!”
Albus shot up from his chair and made an explosive gesture. “No it is not! You must understand that I am fighting an impossible war against an intractable enemy! Two lives, especially lives of those who cannot help our cause, are not worth the lives of those who can, no matter how much it might pain us to admit it!”

“The arithmetic of your morality is disgusting.” Ab’s voice was deadly, lancing into the gaping emptiness that filled the room.

Albus sank back into his chair, his hand rubbing his eyes. “Perhaps, brother, perhaps. But making judgments such as that has always been the easy privilege of those who do not have to lead.” He sighed. “Aberforth, do you not see the impossibility of this? Even if I did muster the Order, where would we go? How would we find these poor souls? You have brought to me the names of two Death Eaters. Of course, the child and Pepst could be being held on one of their properties. Which one? How can we get past their wards? We certainly won’t have any help with this from the Ministry – an assault on private property would be patently illegal, and their victims would be killed or moved long before their wards came down. Or could they be at the home of the third whom you can’t identify? Or at some safehouse of Voldemort’s? Or another follower’s?”

The headmaster began stalking about the room like a caged animal, to the great consternation of Fawkes. “Do you not see? Even if I helped you, we have no time to riddle out their location from the hundreds of possibilities, and it is folly to attempt to assault a property hidden by wards we cannot access!”

Ab was still. “So you won’t help me.” It was not a question.

Albus turned and stared at this brother.

“You are going to try to find them on your own, aren’t you?”

The bartender nodded. “Course I am. I don’t abandon my charges, nor my friends.”

The headmaster’s face crumpled in despair for a brief moment before he smoothed it, though some of the lines lingered. “I would not lose you, Aberforth,” he said quietly.

It occurred to Aberforth that his brother probably truly meant exactly what he said. Emotions he was not interested in exploring now, of all times, threatened to float to the surface of his mind but he clamped down on them. Now’s gotta be about Harry and Pel.

Ab watched with a wary eye as his older brother walked slowly to one of the cabinets that lined his office wall and extracted a thin, faded blue cloth dotted with a pattern of delicate lavender corncockles. Pointing his wand at the fabric Albus intoned, “Portus.” He turned to Aberforth. “Take it. The activation word is pinafore. It will bring you – and any passengers whom you or it are touching – to the Hospital Wing. I,” he sighed again, “I can do no more.”

Ab snatched the cloth from his brother’s hand and left without a word.
“Well, ‘ello there Ab! Don’t see you ‘round these parts much!”

“No time for you, oaf!”

Hagrid’s face crinkled into a frown and he quickly moved to catch up with the older man’s furious pace as he stalked across the Hogwarts grounds. “Somethin’ wrong, Ab?”

Aberforth growled, and then words exploded out of him like rapid-fire bullets as he kept walking. “Boy’s been kidnapped. Bloody Macnair. Don’t know where he is. My dear brother won’t help.”

“I never –, ‘Arry! And you say Dumbledore won’ –”

“Boy’s not worth other people fightin’ over, apparently. They took Pel too.”

Hagrid’s dark eyes shifted about, confused and upset. “Oh Merlin,” he breathed before looking up quickly at Ab. “So, what’re you goin’ ter do? Somethin’ yeah?” There was hope in the half-giant’s suddenly quiet voice.

Ab stopped. “I don’t know! Shoulda put a trackin’ charm on the little fool. Well and good for me to storm off to find ‘im, but I can’t find him!”

Hagrid looked thoughtful. “Don’ know much about rescuin’ people, ta be honest … but I might be able ter help with the findin’ part.”

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ kiddin’ me,” Aberforth glared as Colin pranced up, eyeing Hagrid hopefully. Hagrid smiled and tossed the thestral some meat.

“Dead useful, thestrals are. Kin find any location if ye ask ‘em nice an’ they like ya.”

“So you’re suggestin’ I ask a thestral to find the boy and then ride him to wherever?,” Ab asked, unable to keep the derision out of this tone.

Hagrid frowned. “Nice. I’m suggestin’ ye ask ‘un nicely ter find Harry and then ride ‘em ta wherever he takes ya.” He paused thoughtfully. “Won’ be any help t’all with warding charms though. They kin take ya as close as they kin git ta his location, but not through the wards.”

This is bloody madness, the old man grumbled to himself. But all of this is madness. Ab threw up his hands helplessly and nodded. “All right then. Which one should I take? The little one who likes the boy is too small.”

Hagrid pointed out a much larger adult thestral milling near the side of the paddock. “Take Umbra. She’s Caligo’s mum and seems ta like Harry well enough.”

At Hagrid’s words the mother thestral’s not-ears pricked up and she trotted over to the two men. The
half-giant grinned. “Looks like she’s willin’ ta listen! Now, ask ‘er for ‘er help.”

The old bartender stared at the groundskeeper who shot him an encouraging smile. “Nicely, mind ya, Ab, nicely.”

Shaking his head, Aberforth swallowed the last of his pride. “Dear lady,” he grumbled, “would you please help me find my charge and my friend?”

“Oh, well done, that!”

“Shut it, oaf.”

Ab clamored ungracefully up onto the beast and found himself an awkward position on her emaciated back. As the thestral spread her wings, he looked down at Hagrid. “If I don’t die, you drink free for a month, oaf.”

And then they were in the air, a black gleam gliding over Hogwarts.

When Ab finally dismounted the thestral, his hands were near frozen solid and he knew his arse would be smarting for days. It had taken the thestral more than six bloody hours to travel from northern Scotland to the golden moorland Ab guessed was somewhere in the Forest of Bowland. *Really, pretty damn fast, all things considered,* he granted, but his arse wasn’t feeling charitable.

“So, this is the closest you can get, lady?,” he asked Umbra, who regarded him solemnly with pupil-less eyes. “Well, then, must be warded. I’m off, lady, an’ I don’t know if I’ll be needin’ you again, though I’d be obliged if you’d stick around for a while, just in case.”

Umbra turned away and fast as lighting snared a vole that had been scampering across the spring field. She munched on the carcass languidly and peered around the moor.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

He cautiously began exploring the seemingly empty moorland. Trusting that Hagrid actually knew what he was talking about, the thestral’s ability to find this place meant that the boy was still alive. There had to be some structure nearby. He didn’t have his brother’s talent for feeling magic, but some things didn’t take all that much. A quick circuit of the vicinity confirmed that the place was thrumming with warding charms, *and a damn lot of ‘em. Old ones. Probably blood-based ones, family ones. There’s a manor here.*

Ab sat down hard in the heather, grimacing as he realized he’d forgotten about the literal pain in his arse. *Maybe the old bastard was right,* he grudgingly conceded. *Ain’t nothing I can do against family wards. Hell, without Ministry ward specialists, Albus probably wouldn’t have a chance at it either.*

An hour or so passed. His helplessness filled his mouth with the sour sick of rotten meat.
Eventually he hunkered over behind a cropping of rocks, his eyes focused on where he knew the invisible manse was. The sun was long past its zenith. Night would fall soon enough.

Without any warning, a large, two-story rectangular house appeared in the moor accompanied by the screeching sizzle of magic. The structure had certainly see better days. The pale brown stones of its walls were chipped in places, several windows were broken, and the wrought iron gates were half off their posts, swinging haphazardly in the wind. An old family house, yes, but one that hasn’t been lived in by decent folk for a long time.

While the muggle-repelling charms were likely still intact, the family or blood-based protections had obviously just fallen completely. Sure, the owner could have lifted them, but other than that there’s only one way that family wards disappear like this. Ab grinned. Pel, you daft old drunk, looks like you just ended a family line!

Ab surveyed his target. A single, large front door was the only visible entrance into the house. There was likely at least one more around the side or back, but the building’s abrupt appearance suggested that a battle was being waged inside. Ab snapped a disillusionment charm on himself and made his way quickly and quietly towards the front gate.

The door burst open and the nameless whelp of a Death Eater who had attacked the pub earlier scampered out, eyes wide in shock. He looked around at the grounds of the house, his mouth working but not saying anything. Yep. Lad knows that the wards have fallen. Guess he wasn’t in the fight that killed his mate.

Ab readied his wand to attack the kid, but he had already darted back inside. Waiting a few moments to ensure that no one else was coming out, the older man eventually followed him.

Inside, the large house was a sty. The broken windows had allowed a pervasive damp to set in, and the few pieces of upholstered furniture remaining in the large front room were tattered and rotting. Scattered bottles of Gamp’s Old Gregarious, broken and intact, littered the floor, along with the occasional glass shards from a Firewhiskey bottle. It looked as though someone had been using the walls and furniture as targets for spell practice – and that someone didn’t have the best aim, Ab noted with satisfaction. The place was obviously being used as a squat by undiscerning inhabitants. Creatures from the moor had moved in long ago; the stench of animals suffused the air.

Ab had little doubt that Voldemort, at least, was not in residence. No self-respecting Dark Lord would grace these halls.

The ground floor was silent, but Ab marked a creak above him. Rather than ascend the grand stair – even disillusioned he was wary of approaching an enemy who occupied the higher ground – he made his way around to the back of the manor and, just as he had suspected would be there, located an old servant’s staircase.

The staircase led to a foyer outside a small maid’s quarters, from where he found himself in a small labyrinth of secondary rooms.
Suddenly there came the sound of a door slamming, a muffled call of “Harry!” and another shout. A few moments later he heard the unmistakable incantation of a *Cruciatus* curse.

*Fuck!* Ab fumbled his way through the various rooms in the vague direction from whence the calls had come. *This is taking too long!*

Another shout. *“ACCIO DOOR!”* An explosion of splintering wood echoed through the house. *This way!* The sounds were definitely ahead and to the left. Racing through the rooms, Ab finally found himself in a long, dark hallway illuminated by a single torch. Far at the end was a room with a barred jail door, but the call had come from closer.

The muttering of someone casting healing charms. A quiet conversation.

From his vantage in the hall, he saw the door just ahead of him had been exploded.

As he drew closer, the words became more distinct.

*“Pel! I – I promise I’ll explain,”* Ab closed his eyes in relief and sent a silent prayer of thanks to the universe. That was the boy, and he was talking to Pel. Apparently the washed-up fool had actually won the fight. *“But people can’t know. I swear I’ll explain as soon as we’re safe, but please don’t tell!”*

Now *that* was interesting. Ab stepped into the ruined doorway and surveyed what was apparently a make-shift potions lab-turned-warzone. A worse-for-wear Pel was healing the wild-eyed boy, who was literally caked with blood and whose face was deeply swollen. The boy was awake and talking, though, so Ab swallowed his concern for the moment.

*“Tell what, lad?”* He couldn’t help but be a bit satisfied with the start his comment caused in them both.

*“What the ever-living-fuck kind of mess have you two gotten yourselves into?”* Ab asked, looking over the room and noticing that the whelp and the Dutchman were dead but Macnair was nowhere in sight.

*“Ab! You’re okay!,”* Harry cried and moved to stand up. *Thank you. Thank you.*

Pel kept him down with a hand. *“Don’t you dare move. A cutting curse, *Cruciatus* and *Imperius* curse in the space of seconds, plus all these wounds from the door, a fucked-up head, and what seems to be a wound from being *impaled*? You’re keeping that arse on the floor!”*

As Pel described Harry’s injuries, the old bartender’s face grew dangerously cold. *“Where the *fuck* is Macnair?”* he growled at Pel. *“I might let the ratfucker die sometime next month if he’s lucky!”*

A small warm glow erupted in Harry’s chest, eclipsing just a bit of the pain.
Pel shrugged. “Dunno, he –”

“He’s already dead,” Harry said quietly. “His body’s in the cell at the end of the hall.”

Ab sent him a sharp look, to which Harry shrugged, then winced when it jostled his injured shoulder. “They didn’t think to search me.” When the old man’s brow furrowed, he went on in an even quieter voice. “The knife. It was … it was a really good Christmas present.”

“Ah. Well, I did tell you to make you used it outside the pub, didn’t I?” The feeble joke fell flat. Ab licked his lips and nodded before turning to Pel. “So’d you get these two? Looks like you managed to get a wand.”

Dead silence.

“Well?”

*Please Pel.*

Pel cleared his throat. “Well, no. No I didn’t.” He paused. “Harry took care of them too, when he came to rescue me. I got the wand off Foreren after he had been … dispatched.”

Ab’s eyebrows disappeared into his hair.

“Dammit, Pel!” Harry cried.

“I’m sorry, lad. I like you, but Ab’s been my friend for longer than you’ve been alive. I’ll not lie to him about something like this,” Pel admitted gently. “Seems our young friend has been keeping some secrets, Ab.”

Frowning, his eyes wary, Ab regarded Harry. “I know.”

*What?!

“Lad told me months ago he had things he couldn’t tell me.”

*Oh. Oh yeah.*

Pel scoffed. “Well, I can say that one of those things is that he’s a wizard, and a bloody decent one, at that!”

Ab’s face clouded in shock, then turned contemplative. “S’pose that explains somethings that’ve been botherin’ me,” he said, more to himself than to the other two men. Then he swung a searing glare at Harry. “Why the fuck were you livin’ in the bloody Forest and not snug in a bed at Hogwarts, like you shoulda been?”

*I can’t hide this. No, I can’t hide any of this.*

The absolute impossibility of coming up with a believable lie for the situation was strangely
comforting. It’s like those criminals they talk about on the telly who evade capture for years, but then feel relieved when the police finally nab them. It sucks that they’re caught, but at least they can stop hiding.

Harry took a deep breath, which in turn sent him gasping from his injuries for a few seconds. He looked Ab in the eye. “I’ll tell you,” he turned to Pel, “I’ll tell both of you, I know I can’t get out of it. But not now. Now we’ve got to get out of here. And … and I’ve got to figure out what I’m going to do.” He gulped and tried to keep his voice from shaking. “I killed three people.” Don’t freak out. Job’s still not done. “Just, you’ll understand once I explain, please believe me, just … we can’t tell anyone I can do magic. We just can’t!”

The two men looked at each, then looked at him. “Please! Please trust me. I know that you –” Harry broke off, at a loss for what he could say. What did he know? Today had just been too much. He felt very, very young.

“Please.”

The pause felt endless.

“Okay.”

Harry blinked. “Oh – okay?”

“Not a hard word to understand boy!” Ab barked. “Okay, now we figure out how we’re goin’ to handle this load of shit –” he made a sweeping gesture around the room – “and get the hell outta here. Later, well, later you’re going to talk.”

Harry nodded quickly.

He had little time to bask in what was still the relative strangeness of an adult who listened to him and didn’t automatically believe that he or she knew best. Ab was already moving on. He rummaged in his bag and grabbed a handful of various potions which he pushed off on Harry and Pel. “All right. You killed all three of these shits, yeah Harry?”

Harry had just swallowed some sort of nasty potion and so nodded, his neck feeling oddly wobbly.

“How?”

“How?”

Pel rolled his eyes. “Well, according to you, we have to explain this mess without telling anyone you can use magic, child. Thus we need to come up with a plausible story that conforms to the available physical evidence.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense.” Harry closed his eyes. “Er, I stabbed Macnair with my knife … Um, I think I may have stabbed him a lot.”

“Did you use any magic at all in the cell? Anything we’ll need to explain?”
Harry tried to clear his mind of all the … thoughts that came with thinking of stabbing Macnair. “Yeah, I managed a little *Reducto*. I’d been chained in cuffs that were attached to the floor, and I used it to break a few links in the chain.”

“Where’d you get the wand?” Ab wondered.

“Oh, I didn’t have one. I, er, still don’t, so I guess we don’t have to worry about *Prior Incantato*, yeah?” (*)

Ab stared. “Let’s worry later about how the fuck you know about *that* spell. You did a *Reducto* wandless?”

Harry nodded. “I’ve been working on wandless magic a little when … well, when you aren’t around.”

Ab sent a glance heavenward. “Right, later. So you got your hands free. What happened next?”

“Macnair came back before I could do anything else. I managed to get him close to me, to get him mad. When he attacked me, I stabbed him. Well, like I said, I stabbed him kind of a lot.” The men looked at him. “Well, I had to be sure, right?”

Ab spoke softly. “Good lad. Never leave any enemy like him behind you.”

Harry took a shaky breath. “I snapped his wand when it didn’t work for me and used the keys he had to unlock the door. I had to hurry, because I could hear them hurting Pel –” Ab gave the man a sharp, concerned look, which Pel waved off – “so I found this room and came in. The man with the braid was asking Pel questions. I …”

“What?” Ab barked, though it was without its usual bite.

“I planned on sneaking up behind him – his back was to the door – and hitting him over the head because I wasn’t sure if I could do magic again, but I made a noise and he turned around to fight me. I used an *Accio* to summon a cauldron that hit him in the back of the head. It knocked him out.”

“I was present for the rest of it, Ab,” Pel broke in, to Harry’s great relief. He quickly and delicately described the Panoptica cuffs, the death of Folteren, the arrival of Unsonsy, his use of Unforgivables (which had Ab’s eyebrows disappearing into his hair again), and Harry’s use of another *Accio* to cause an impromptu door bomb.

By the end, Ab has his head in his hands.

Finally, he looked up. “All right. This is what we’re going to do. First: lad, you were never in chains. You were just locked in the room. That takes care of the first spell. You can stick pretty much to what happened for Macnair.”

Pel chimed in. “As for the injury to Folteren, we can say that you burst in, which distracted Folteren, and I hit him over the head with the cauldron. The trajectory and general angle of the hit will match well enough with that story, for Auror investigators at least.”
Ab pulled a thoughtful face. “We have two problems. The door and Folteren’s death.” He and Pel seemed to engage in some sort of unspoken conversation before Ab abruptly ordered them all into the hallway.

Getting up was much harder than Harry had expected. He’d been in pain, but his mind had been clear throughout the entire conversation. As soon as he stood, he began swaying and shaking uncontrollably. Ab firmly guided him several meters away from the door and gave him another potion. “Blood loss, shock, and a fuckin’ Crucio,” he muttered. “Dogs, the lot of ‘em.”

He helped Pel to Harry and then turned back into the doorway with his wand out. “PROTEGO, REDUCTO!” he incanted in quick succession. A small but devastating bomb seemed to go off in the room. When it was over, Folteren and Unsonsy were little more than pulp, the latter’s wand – and just about everything else in the room – in slivers. Only the small area near where Pel had been remained undestroyed.

“What –?”

Ab looked at Harry. “Use your head boy. Story’s simple enough. Unsonsy was torturin’ you – leave out the Imperius, just say the cutting curse and Crucio, as you can’t hide the effects. I got here, cast a strong Protego on you an’ Pel and then blew the shit out of the room, killing those two shits. Sure as hell can’t tell that Folteren ever had his throat slit. We’ll have to say the shield didn’t fully hold, though, to explain your injuries.”

Pel nodded. “It works, an’ it’ll play in court.”

What?

“What?” Harry gasped. “Ab, I can’t let you say that you killed them! It’s my fault! I did it!” He felt his knees getting weak. The adrenaline was really wearing off now. His vision blurred.

Suddenly Ab’s face was only inches from his own. “Now you listen to me, Harry, and listen good. You remember what I told you about squibs and wizards? You could’a gone to prison just for breakin’ Macnair’s wand. What do you think’ll happen if you claim to have killed three purebloods? Hmmm?”

Pel spoke softly near Harry’s shoulders. “Lad, we can’t cover Macnair’s death. The only way Ab could get in here is if he were dead – it’s what made the warding charms fail. Given the circumstances, sane people will hopefully understand that he had kidnapped you an’ it was in self-defense. Of course, the same is true of Folteren and Unsonsy, but a squib claiming to have killed three wizards, well, there can be no good outcome for that.” He looked at Ab apologetically. “Because of the situation of the room an’ the cuffs, I can’t say that I killed either of them, or I would. Ab’s perfect; it even fits with the timeline of the wards falling fairly well, which I’m sure Gringotts will have on record. Let Ab do this … unless of course you want to admit you have magic.”

Harry was very near tears. “But I don’t want you to get in trouble!” Further protests were shocked out of him when Ab cupped his cheek in his hand.

“They can’t do much to me Harry. They’ll probably even praise this. I’m trustin’ you already. Now you trust me.”
Harry’s head was swimming, but there was only one thing he could say.

“Okay.”

Ab cracked a smile that disappeared almost immediately. Straightening up, he cast a patronus shaped like a goat which he instructed to tell some lady that she could go back to Hogwarts. Waving off his companions’ questions about that for later, he pulled out the blue fabric and made sure that both the others had good grips on it. With one last look at the day’s carnage, he said pinafore, and they disappeared forever from the house of Walden Macnair.

Chapter End Notes

(*) According to the Harry Potter wiki, Prior Incantato is just the reverse spell that forces a wand to show the last spells cast, while Priori Incantatem has a related, but quite different, effect.

Thanks for reading, and thanks especially for your comments!

EDIT: A quick note on comments: So I’ve been making a point to respond to every comment, even with just a thank you, but my partner pointed out that this looks creepy to him. Having no desire to be creepy, I’m going to stop and only respond if I actually have something other to say than "thanks!"
However, I truly do appreciate every comment. My day job is rather awful right now, and reading your comments -- be they positive or constructively critical -- really makes my day. So thank you!!!
29 March, 1977

The moment the spinning maelstrom feeling of the portkey stopped, Harry collapsed, with Pel falling
down beside – and nearly on top – of him.

His body *hurt*. Portkey travel wasn’t known for being gentle, and Harry groaned as he realized that
several of the wounds Pel had clumsily healed were open and oozing blood again.

“Out of the way, oh, out of the way!” came an alarmed, brisk voice that seemed very familiar to him.
Pale blue eyes suddenly appeared, scanning his face intently before narrowing in confusion. “You’re
not a student …” The woman shook her head dismissively, a dark brown curl escaping from her bun.
“Well, that’s for the headmaster. Onto the bed with you.”

Harry felt himself being levitated onto a bed, and gazed up at the white ceiling. *I know this place …
I’m in Hogwarts! The Hospital Wing!* Before today, Hogwarts was at the top of the list of places he
did *not* want to be, but after Macnair… *Wait*, he interrupted his himself, *holy shite, that’s Madam
Pomfrey!*

He managed to turn his head a bit and watched the woman – *yes, she’s young, but that’s definitely
Pomfrey* – levitate Pel onto the bed next to him. Ab made to say something but she shushed him with
a scowl. Grabbing an armful of potion bottles, she poured two into Harry’s mouth, ignoring his
muffled protests that he could do it *himself*, and then did the same with Pel.

*Pain and Calming Draughts*, Harry’s mind supplied, as he felt the agony ebb away and his mind
become woozy.

Pomfrey finally rounded on Ab, who put his hands up and protested that he wasn’t injured.

“Well obviously!,” the woman snapped, her wand out. “I want to know who you three are, why a
*child* is near bleeding to death, and how in the world you managed to portkey into my Hospital
Wing!”

Aberforth hesitated.

“Now young man!” Pomfrey barked. Through the haze of the calming draught Harry vaguely
appreciated the irony of the thirty-something Madam Pomfrey calling Ab a “young man.”

Ab glared, but obliged her. “I’m Aberforth Dumbledore,” Pomfrey’s eyes widened. “Boy’s name is
Harry, he’s Peloother Pepst. If you get my fool of a brother down here, he’ll confirm that they were
kidnapped earlier today, I went to get ‘em, and he gave me the portkey.” He stopped her as she
moved immediately to the fireplace. “But before you do that, let’s make somethin’ clear.”
Harry squinted to make out what was going on, missing his glasses. It looked like Ab was pulling parchment out of his robes. “See this? I take it you know what it means, yes?”

Pomfrey nodded.

“Well, lemme be clear. I do not give you permission to discuss any aspect of his health or current physical condition with anyone besides myself. That means even my brother. As you said, boy’s not a student.”

The matron furrowed her brow, but nodded again. “Of course, Mr. Dumbledore. My Healer’s Vow and the law both now prevent that.”

Harry peeped over at Pel, who was watching him closely, though his eyes were also dull from the potions. *Later*, he mouthed.

Pomfrey’s impatient clucking brought Harry’s attention away from Pel. “Well, then, Mr. Dumbledore, you, call your brother for me. I’ll need to focus on them, if you please!”

She moved to Harry and cast a number of quick spells that he’d heard her cast over him in the past before. Her eyes widened. “But this indicates he’s a –”

Ab nodded as he went to the fireplace, but didn’t stop or turn around. “Member that vow of yours and those papers, Madam. Don’t matter what he is, he ain’t a student.”

Her eyes were anxious as they darted back and forth, but she said nothing else until she started listing off his injuries in a more clinical tone. “Moderate concussion, compound zygomatic fracture – that’s your cheekbone, child – traumatic puncture just above the coracoid process but no significant complications, two broken and two cracked ribs, laceration to the chest damaging serratus interior, multiple lesser abrasions and lacerations by foreign shrapnel …”, she trailed off. “Short-term exposure to *Cruciatus* curse.” She sniffed. “And extreme exhaustion. Well, potions will take care of most of this, rest will help with what they can’t.”

He winced and groaned internally as she summoned an array of bottles to the bedside table. He’d had most of these potions before, and knew all too well what they tasted like. Pel snorted sympathetically at his face.

“I’ll be right there with you soon enough, my young friend.”

Harry only realized he’d drifted into a doze while watching Pomfrey bustle around Pel when raised voices pulled him out of it.

“… don’t give a troll’s fart about the politics! You’re the Chief Warlock of the bloody Wizengamot, I know you can make this happen!,” Ab was shouting.

“And you, Aberforth, know that these things are never that easy.”

“Only because bastards like you make them complicated!”
He peered around the darkening Hospital Wing carefully. The Dumbledores were across the room, obviously arguing. Pel was asleep, his mouth open and drooling into his gray hair. Madam Pomfrey burst out of her office and shot a glance at Harry.

“Gentlemen! I don’t’ care who you are, you will keep your voices down in my Hospital Wing! You’re disturbing my patient!”

Ab looked over at Harry and scowled back at his brother. “Well, the lad should be disturbed by all this. Fuck knows I bloody well am!”

At that Dumbledore also gazed in Harry’s direction, and immediately softened his face into a smile.

“Ah, you’ve awakened, my boy. My apologies for disturbing you, though I must say we are so very glad to see you alive and relatively unharmed, Henry.”

“Howdy.” The headmaster blinked. “My name is Harry, sir, not Henry.”

Dumbledore touched a hand to his head as he shook it apologetically. “I beg your pardon, Harry.” Harry caught Ab rolling his eyes. “However, child, it saddens me to admit that there will likely be some, ah, complications from your day’s adventure. Some of your choices, alas, will not be met with praise, I suspect.”

Well now I am disturbed …

“What do you mean sir? A Death Eater kidnapped and tortured me. He planned to kill me. I didn’t choose any of that.”

The headmaster sighed. “I know, my boy, I do know. Yet although we cannot always choose what happens to us, we can choose how to respond to it.”

Harry felt distinctly wrong-footed in this conversation. “I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t understand. What —”


Pel’s eyes lolled open and he instinctively looked around for his pint. “Huh? Whuzzgoin’ – Merlin, Ab, I just got to sleep!”

“Sleep later. We’re goin’! Get your arse up and over here.”

Madam Pomfrey was goggling at the scene and finally found her voice again. “Absolutely not! Albus, both my patients are suffering from multiple injuries, including torture curses. They’re not leaving until I authorize it, and I most certainly do not!”

“Neither are students or staff, Madam,” Ab growled. “By rights neither should even be here in the first place. You’ve done what needs to be done for ‘em already anyway, and for that we thank you. We’re goin’.”

The matron looked to Dumbledore for support, but he simply shook his head as Ab helped Harry up from the bed. Harry noticed with satisfaction that he really did feel better already. Sure, he wanted to sleep for a week and his entire body felt deeply bruised, but the pain wasn’t too horrible and his
hands had stopped shaking.

Ab helped Harry and Pel into the fireplace and grabbed a handful of Floo powder. “Again thank you for your attentions, ma’am. If you’d be so kind, send any potions either still needs to the Hog’s Head, and bill the pub for ‘em.” Pomfrey nodded with a murmured “of course.” Ab turned to his brother and spoke in cold, quiet voice. “Albus. You do this for me. You do it. And if you can’t stop it, for fuck’s sake, you make it come out right.”

He didn’t wait for a response, but threw the powder down with a barked “Hog’s Head!”.

Ab and Pel were looking at him expectantly.

Harry gulped and picked absently at the soft woolen blanket tucked around him. Though largely healed, it seemed every inch of his body was tender and sore.

As soon as they had returned to the Head, Ab had sent an owl to Quisby, ordering him to “get his arse over here and man the pub” for the night, then impatiently ushered the two injured males up the stairs to the one room in the inn that Harry was not allowed to enter.

Aberforth’s private bedroom was not what Harry had expected. Its smallness was accentuated by the heaving bookcase in the corner, but offset by simple earthen tones of the room. A touch of brightness was added by the yellow and black Hufflepuff scarf that hung in the corner. There’s no way Ab was a ‘Puff, Harry had marveled in disbelief, he’s got to have been a – a – huh. Really, what House would Ab have been in?

The man had immediately transfigured his double bed into two singles into which he deposited Harry and Pel before conjuring himself a squashy armchair. He had tossed each of them a Pepper-Up Potion.

And now the two men were looking at him.

“What?”


Harry wanted to protest that he was too exhausted to have this conversation now, but the looks on the older men’s faces assured him that such an excuse, even if true, wasn’t going to fly.

Well, Ab is lying to cover up what I did to Folteren and Unsonsy. Guess I wouldn’t wait around either if it were me.

His hands started shaking a little, though this time it wasn’t the vestiges of Unsonsy’s Cruciatius. The sudden lump in his throat seemed to be made from thick, scratchy wool that soaked up every bit of moisture. His eyes darted to the walls, but they were bare and unadorned. I wish Ariana were here.

The two men were still looking at him.

He closed eyes, fumbling in his mind for how to begin, where to begin.

Just tell them the truth. Tell them everything. You’ll feel better when it’s over, he encouraged himself.
“Okay.” *Breathe.* “My name is Harry, er, Harry James…Potter, that is.”

Both men exploded.

“You’re one of those ponces?!” Albus shouted.

“There’s no way ol’ Fleamont would let –” Pel began.

Harry glared at Ab for the ‘ponces’ comment. “*Shut up!* You want to hear the story or not? Don’t interrupt or we’ll never get through it!”

The men grumbled but shut their mouths.

“*Okay,*” Harry muttered, “Like I said, my name is Harry Potter and,” *Breathe dammit!* He felt like Hagrid was sitting on his chest. “And I was born on July 31st … 1980.”

Pel giggled helplessly. Ab just stared.

“Yeah, er 1980. My parents –”

“Stop right there,” the bartender said in a level voice. “Accio Firewhiskey!” He flicked his wand to open his bedroom door and a few moments later a bottle of Ogden’s soared in and into his outstretched hand.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Ab, who just shrugged. “Where this story seems to be goin’, I expect I’ll need it.”

“Pour me one,” Pel piped up.

It was Harry’s turn to laugh nervously.

“Okay, so my parents are James Potter, oh *Jesus,* stop making that face Ab!, and a muggleborn witch, Lily Evans.” Neither man seemed to know her, though both were still shaking their heads over his surname.

They’re freaking out just because of who my dad was and my birthdate. This is only going to get worse.

“When I was fifteen months old, a family friend betrayed us to Voldemort, who came to our house. He killed my mum and dad, and then, well then he tried to kill me. With, uh, a killing curse. But it didn’t work.” Harry paused as the men exclaimed and glared until they quieted. “Some people said it, I don’t know, rebounded or something. Well, whatever happened, I got this scar,” he lifted his fringe, “and everyone agreed that Voldemort had been defeated and, well, people said it was because of me. They called me the ‘Boy-Who-Lived.’”

The men stared. Ab took another drink.

“I want a look a the scar, please,” Pel requested weakly.

Harry fidgeted. He *hated* when people gaped at the thing, but this was Pel, so … “Yeah. Okay. But let me tell the story first.” At Pel’s nod, he continued.
“Thing is, though, I didn’t know about any of this for a long time! They sent me to my relatives—my mum’s muggle sister and her family—and my aunt and uncle don’t, uh, like magic much, so they never told me, and I didn’t know I was a wizard until my eleventh birthday. That was also the year I later found out that Voldemort wasn’t really dead. Just sort of, er, disembodied.”

The words were coming out easier now, Harry noticed.

Ab looked thoughtful. “So you were raised Muggle, yeah?” He snorted. “Well, that ‘splains some of what was naggin’ me about you.” When Harry gave him a puzzled look, he snorted again. “You say muggle things all the time, act like a muggleborn and smile all stupid when you see new magic. When I found you in the snow you were ramblin’ on about television. Plus, Wigol told me you knew all about the thing when you stayed at his place for the day. Squibs are magic-raised, a’ course, so you shouldn’t’a known any of that, least not as well as you did. But people, especially when they think no one is watchin’ or when they’re drunk or hurt, show you what comes natural to ‘em. Muggle stuff comes natural to you. An’ there was stuff—general stuff—about our world you just didn’t know. Sure as shit should’a known ‘bout how squibs are treated if you really were one.” He paused to sip his whiskey. “Anyhow, get on with it.”

Well.

Apparently Harry wasn’t as accomplished at playing the squib as he had thought.

Putting that annoying thought aside, he went on, running through his reintroduction to the wizarding world, his arrival at Hogwarts, and his pursuit of the person he was sure was intent on stealing the Philosopher’s Stone. When Harry first mentioned the stone’s being at the school, he caught Pel and Ab giving each other a look, but plowed onwards, trying to stick only to what was strictly necessary. Both men puzzled over his description of Quirrell—Voldemort for a bit.

He moved on to his second year. This time he cut out even more of the tale—did they really need to know about Dobby, or Moaning Myrtle, or Aragog? With a cringe he told them about being a Parselmouth, but that bit couldn’t be avoided. Neither seemed all that interested in it, to his great relief. Instead, both were far more concerned and deeply confused by the actions of the diary and the appearance of memory-Riddle.

“Wait!,” Pel cried. “This Riddle is Voldemort?! Wasn’t Riddle the one you said earlier used a _Cruciatus_ on you?”

Harry nodded awkwardly, “Yeah, but he doesn’t do that for a few more years.”

“So, you’re saying that Voldemort is a muggleborn?! The man seemed torn between hyperventilating and giggling.

“Stuff it Pel. Yeah, he is. Albus told me the real name of this upstart Dark Lord some years back. Get on with it, lad.”

When Harry described the basilisk, both men made for the slowly emptying bottle of Ogden’s with another shared glance, but they thankfully didn’t interrupt him. After he admitted to being pierced by the beast’s fang, Pel just whispered that Harry needed to work on keeping sharp things from stabbing him, advice with which Harry entirely agreed. Ab seemed furious when Fawkes appeared, but only scowled and said nothing.
Third year went quite a bit more quickly. Sure, Sirius was important to Harry, but there was no need to go through the whole year, and Harry wanted to move on with the story so that he could ignore the deep pang that came with thinking of his Sirius, not the young idiot currently lounging up at the school. He managed to get through the short narrative without even talking about Professor Lupin in any great detail.

Then there was fourth year. *This will be harder*, he thought, and it was. Death Eaters at the World Cup. The Tri-Wizard Tournament. The death of Barty Crouch Sr. The labyrinth. Cedric, Pettigrew, an arm bleeding red on pale skin, a cauldron, a resurrected Dark Lord. The dual and the ghosts that came with it. Barty Crouch Jr. A disbelieving ministry, a summer spent alone in an information blackout.

Throughout the sordid tale, neither man, for once, interrupted. They sat and listened and drank. *Breathe.* “And then one night I was walking in our neighborhood and I ran into Dudley, my cousin. We had an argument, but then … then the Dementors came. Two of them. I don’t know why they were there, or who sent them – Voldemort, maybe? – but they were suddenly there. I *tried*, I swear I did, I tried to cast my patronus but … but this time I couldn’t believe my happy thought enough, I guess.”

Ab and Pel were listening hard, their eyes wide.

“And so one of them Kissed me.”

Pel dropped his glass.

“It was … weird, really. The Dementor almost seemed sorry or something. It kind of spoke, but in my head, y’know, and said ‘a soul for a soul.’ And that the ‘price was fixed.’ Oh, and something about how they were only monsters because they were made to be, or something. I thought I was done for because everything sort of disappeared and was so *still*. And then everything got fast again and it hurt. I woke up right where I’d been attacked. Except it was 1976, not 1995.”

Ab put his head in his hands.

“I took the Knight Bus to a friend’s parents’ house – they’re the ones who gave me those clothes, see – but then I realized that I could seriously fuck up the entire universe just by being here, make it so that my friends, or me, or whoever isn’t even *born*. So I freaked out and went to Hogsmeade only because it was the first place I thought of. And then I hid in the cave Sirius had used. I just didn’t know what else I could do, see? I was afraid it’d be way too easy to change the timeline if I tried to go to Hogwarts, and that if Dumbledore or the Ministry found out about me, that they’d, I don’t know, stick me in a cell or a laboratory somewhere. And then you found me instead. And, well, I guess that’s about it.” He cut himself off, suddenly nervous. “I mean, you … you do believe me, right?”

“Aye,” was all Ab said, mumbling the word through his hands.

The silence in the room was thick.

“I mean, I *swear*, I am sorry that I let you believe I was a squib – though you came up with it, really – and that I lied to you, I really *am* sorry! But I just … I just don’t know what to do and I’m, well, I’m really fucking scared,” he finished lamely.
The silence continued. Pel was looking intently at Ab, whose face remained in his hands.

“I, uh, I, if you want me to leave, I’ll just go. I can … well I’m nearly paid up to you, but I can figure out a way to pay you back for the potions I got today.” Harry forced himself to stop rambling and made to stand up, his whole self feeling like an exposed scrap of nothing.

“Sit your arse back on that bed, boy.” Ab commanded in an … odd tone.

Harry sat, breathing fast, his eyes downcast. Waiting.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Ab started laughing.

“Seriously! It’s not that funny! Hell, it’s not funny at all! Let’s see how I react if you get Kissed by a Dementor, you old bastard!”

It had started out as a low, insistent chuckle, but soon Ab was laughing uproariously, his whole body shaking as tears streamed down his face. At first Harry had been alarmed and more than a little concerned for the man’s mental health. He’s over a hundred maybe, right? Did I break him? Five minutes on, Harry had had quite enough of the old man’s apparently uncontrollable amusement at what was, after all, Harry’s life.

And sort-of-death.

Or whatever.

Peloother just sat on his bed, eyes distant.

Aberforth made a valiant effort to rein in his laughter, took one look at Harry, and promptly buried his head in his hands once again, shoulders shaking.

“Really? Really?” Harry huffed back into his pillows.

“I – I – I’m sorry lad … I’ve worked a pub for more decades than I’d like to count, and of all the ridiculous shit I’ve heard, that one takes it!”

“But you said you believed me!”

Ab mopped at his eyes and took a few heaving breaths. “Aye, I do. But hearin’ shit like that, what else can a sane person do other than laugh?”

Harry opened his mouth to offer suggestions for a number of more welcome responses, but Ab waved him off.

“I am sorry, lad. It’s just after what happened earlier I had you pegged as a wizard who’d been hidden in the Muggle world to keep you safe from Death Eater parents or some such rot, though that didn’t fit so well with what I’d seen of you … Guess I should’a been more imaginative!” He started laughing again. “Merlin, boy, wraiths, killer diaries, basilisks, Dementors, time travel, killing curses! I just don’t know where to start!”

“I do,” Pel said, his quiet, serious voice a shocking contrast to Ab’s. “We start by making it
absolutely clear that you,” he nodded to Harry, “are never speak of this to anyone else. Ever.”

Harry blinked. “Well, it’s not I like plan to. I wouldn’t even be telling you if I didn’t have to.”

Pel scoffed furiously. “You could have come up with another lie to explain your magic usage, don’t be a fool! You didn’t have to tell us all this. You told us because you wanted to.” Harry made to protest, but Pel angrily cut him off. “Lie to us all you want, but don’t lie to yourself!”

He nodded dumbly, thoroughly confused by Pel’s behavior. He was always so jovial and kind, and now he seemed to be seething.

“You were right to be worried about what would happen to you if those in power found out about any of this.”

Harry’s voice suddenly couldn’t raise above a whisper. “Why?”

“Because if the Ministry were to discover your past, the Unspeakables would follow right behind them,” Pel hissed. “If you were lucky, you’d just be confined to the bowels of the Department of Mysteries for the rest of your life, to be poked an’ prodded an’ experimented upon. If you were unlucky – well, in any case your life would effectively be over. Period.”

*My God, the man looks absolutely terrified.*

“How – how do you know all this, Pel?”

The man laughed without a trace of humor. “Cause it’d be a man like I used to be who’d wrap up your case all nice and neat an’ present it to the Ministry with a big red bow on it.”

“Pel here used to be a barrister. Represented the Department of Mysteries for a while,” Ab broke in quietly. “It’s why the Death Eaters captured him. They wanted information.”

*Holy shite, Pel was a lawyer? For, like, the magical version of MI5? ‘Anthropologist of men’ my arse.*

“So believe me when I tell you that you are never to speak of the results of the Dementor’s Kiss with anyone else ever again. Shit, tellin’ us was the height of self-indulgent stupidity! In the future, I don’t care how much you like a person, how much you trust them, how much you’re sure they’d never betray you, you understand, boy? One wrong word an’ there’s no one who could help you!” Pel’s eyes were wild and bored straight into Harry.

Terror finally set into Harry’s stomach and he nodded slowly. “I understand, Pel.”

Pel watched him closely for a few moments and sighed. “Well okay then. Now,” he continued briskly. “You’ve given us quite a bit of information, an’ I frankly don’t have the strength to think through all of it tonight. I suggest Ab and I think of our questions and we return to this conversation on a day when you an’ I haven’t been tortured.” After Harry nodded again, he turned to Aberforth.

“However, I don’t think I’m wrong in saying there might be some issues with the Ministry because of what happened today.”

Ab grunted. “Albus pretty much admitted he wouldn’t be able to stop ‘em if the ‘Gamot got it into their heads to come after the boy for Macnair. I think he’d be able to get outta trouble eventually, but it might not be pretty.”
Well fuck.

Pel gave Ab a pointed look. The old bartender sighed and moved to sit on the foot of Harry’s bed.

This can’t be good.

“I was goin’ to, ah, show these soon, lad, but I was waitin’ for the right time,” He pulled the parchments he had flashed to Pomfrey earlier out of his robes. “Seems time’s up.”

Harry curiously looked down at the top sheet, which was emblazoned with the sigil for the Ministry of Magic.

Approval for Custodianship of Minor Squib

The undersigned applicant ABERFORTH GAIUS DUMBLEDORE, as of 24 MARCH 1977 is approved as custodian of the minor squib HARRY [NO SURNAME] until such time as the applicant dissolves custodianship or the squib achieves its majority in the Muggle world.

By signing, the applicant agrees to:

a. instill in the squib a clear and accurate understanding of its place in wizarding society.
b. provide adequate food and shelter appropriate for a child of its standing.
c. act as an intermediary between it and wizarding society.
d. consider and promote options for the integration of squib into non-magical society.

By signing below, the squib acknowledges its acceptance of the applicant as its custodian, with all the rights and privileges over its person as the position grants.

Aberforth had already signed the approval form, apparently more than a month before. Another line contained the signature of a witness – Peloothr P. Pepst. A single blank line at the bottom waited for Harry’s name. He flipped through the rest of the small pile of parchment. They all looked like official application forms, full of legalistic language and subsection after subsection (even the word “subsection” made Harry nervous).

What the hell is this?

“What the hell is this?”

Ab cleared his throat. “You’ve paid your debt to me, an’ I think you might’a guessed that you were paid up long ago. But it was cold, so I kept you here. An’ I ain’t goin’ to apologize for that. But I knew you’d be leavin’ soon, arse all fired up to go back to a bloody cave for whatever reason. Thought, well, I thought I’d give you another option. If you were interested. You ain’t half shit company, and the regulars like you. An’ the goats. Thought you might want to stay on the Head, that is.”
“This – are you adopting me?”

“No!” Ab exclaimed, “and be careful with that word. A wizard can’t adopt a squib, s’ against the law. This is just custodianship – it’s the only way an adult wizard who isn’t a blood relative can legally look after a squib child. Form’s a new thing. Came out of the Squib Marches a’ the 60s. Used to be that any wizard could just claim any unattached squib kid, less regulated than house elves they were. You can imagine, well, things usually didn’t go well for kids claimed like that. They only managed to get the form passed because the pureblood bastards liked the terms. Look at ‘em, for Merlin’s sake. Pile of shit, but we can work ‘round them easy enough.”

Harry looked again. They were horrible. “It. Its standing. Its place.”

Ab nodded at Harry’s grimace. “No, the form hasn’t done much for squibs, not really. Sure, the purebloods made a stink about the requirement of a squib’s signature, but one compulsion charm later and you got yourself your very own squib kid. ‘Course, there’s not many unattached squibs, but I’m sure some poor lost souls are falling through the cracks.”

“So,” Harry said slowly, “if I sign this, what exactly does that mean for me?”

Ab shrugged. “Means nothin’ really changes from the way it’s been. You can stay here, work ‘round the inn and pub, though we’ll have to figure a way to teach you magic. I won’t letta charge a’ mine be uneducated, if I can help it.” He paused. “An’ if you decide you want to go back to your cave or somewhere else, I won’t stop you.”

Pel cut in. “It’s more than that, though Harry. See term 3? Well, I think we can bet the Ministry is going to come after you for Macnair, an’ they might try to do something to Ab because of the other two he’s saying he killed. First, this protects Ab, because its his job to ‘act as your intermediary.’ If he comes under fire we can argue that his rescue of you constituted his fulfillment of a contractual obligation. If that doesn’t work, well, one could make the case that he was just retrieving what essentially is his property.” Pel spat out the last word. “Second, this might help protect you as well, because you’re now connected to a wizarding family. You don’t take his surname, of course, but having such a connection could help you if they pursue this ridiculousness.”

“But I’m not a squib! If I sign it, will the contract, I don’t know, kill me or take my magic because I’ve violated its terms?”

The two men looked at each other and laughed. “Bloody hell, Harry, this isn’t the Goblet of Fire,” Pel said. “It’s a squib form. Not like the Ministry cares. There’s no magic involved, just ink and parchment.”

Harry rolled all this over in his head. “You were a barrister, Pel?” The man nodded. “If you were me, would you sign this?”

Pel looked at him carefully. “Ab, would you give the boy and me a moment?”

As the door closed behind the bartender, Pel turned to Harry. “Yeah, Harry I would sign it. This does open you up to an incredible amount of abuse by the applicant, so I would normally say absolutely not, but this is Ab. Ab won’t take advantage of you. He asked me to get these together more than a month ago because, I think, he was worried about you. And more than that, I think he just doesn’t want you leave … He likes you, and he wants to help.” He chewed thoughtfully on his
lip. “And given everything else that’s happened to you before you arrived here, I think you’re better off with Ab than you would ever be alone.”

Harry looked at the form, a strange throbbing welling in his chest. *I’ve always wanted a grown-up. It should have been my parents, or Sirius, or the Dursleys, but it wasn’t. Ab could be my adult.*

Images from the last four months popped into his head. *Ab getting him shoes, the hot chocolate after the pub fight, him sleeping next to Harry all night after he broke down, Christmas…* He raised his eyes and looked vaguely around the room before he caught sight of the dreadful carving of Amaltheia that he had given to Ab. It was on the man’s dresser, next to a small framed picture of Ariana.

*Oh.*

*I think … Ab’s already my adult. I just hadn’t noticed it yet.*

*And he signed this a while ago. Before he knew who I was in my time. Before he knew there was anything special about me.*

He pursed his lips to keep his smile from growing, though Pel was looking at him knowingly.

“Yeah, well then I’ll sign.”

Ab came in later with a tray full of potions and hot chocolate for the both of them.

“Thanks Ab. Oh, and Doris works the first night shift at the Ministry counter usually,” Pel remarked. “If you can rustle up an owl, I can send her these forms immediately so that she can backdate them to February and have ‘em lost in the files by morning.”

A flash of a small smile appeared on Ab’s face, Harry was sure of it, but it melted away just as quickly. Instead he just grunted and made to head out with the parchments.

*He’s happy! I know he is! Maybe … maybe something good can come out of this mess with Macnair.*

*Macnair …*

The man’s name echoed in Harry’s head. There was something *there*, something that suddenly felt horribly, unspeakably *wrong*. Harry shivered away from picturing the man’s face, but there it was, dead and white on the cell floor.

There it was, mouth gaping through a Death Eater mask as he looked on the newly-risen Voldemort.

There it was, grinning maliciously as he sharpened his axe in preparation for Buckbeak’s execution.

…

…
Oh dear God. Macnair!

“Macnair!,” he cried out pure terror. “Macnair!”

I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. Oh God. Oh God. I can’t breathe.

“What? Lad, what is it? Harry!” Ab was at his side, blue eyes wide and concerned.

“Macnair!” I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.

“Dammit, lad, what?” Pel bit out.

“I killed Macnair!”

The two men frowned in deepening concern.

“Nothin’ to feel guilty about, lad, we know –” Ab began.

Harry had to make them understand.

“It’s 1977!” he managed to choke out. “I killed Macnair! But – but – but I met him a few times in the 1990s!”

Dawning horror spread across Ab and Pel’s faces.

Harry shuddered as he voiced his nightmare, struggling not to vomit. “I’ve changed the timeline. My timeline. For sure.” His whisper felt like a scream.

The room was filled with the quickened breaths of the trio. Finally, Pel spoke up with surprising calm.

“Well, I suppose it’s all right.”

Harry and Ab wheeled on Pel in shock.

The man shrugged. “Harry killed Macnair hours ago. I’m no expert – I just worked for ‘em – but I’m guessing that if it were a problem, either the universe would have, I don’t know, imploded or whatever then. Or our Harry would have just vanished then. But it didn’t an’ you’re still here. So I suppose it’s all right. Either way, nothing for it now but to toast to the continued existence of existence, lads, and to the fact that the universe apparently doesn’t revolve around Walden Macnair.”

He flipped the cork out of the bottle of Firewhiskey and took a long pull. It was Harry’s turn to laugh helplessly – really, what else could one do? – and grab the bottle from Pel for himself.

Ab left, papers in hand, muttering darkly about time-traveling teenagers and alcoholic barristers.

________

Much later, long after Harry had fallen asleep, Ab came in with another round of potions.

Pel cocked a sleepy eye open at him. “Again?”

“Shouldn’t fuck around with Cruciatus. Drink up.”
The barfly grimaced but obeyed. “You going to wake him for his doses of piss?”

Ab snorted what Pel knew translated as a ‘yes,’ but didn’t move toward the sleeping teenager.

“His is quite the story, isn’t it?” Pel commented casually, watching Aberforth watching the boy. “Soon you an’ I should have a talk about what all that future history means. A basilisk in the school. Dementors running amok, sending boys back in time. All that about Voldemort. A lot of it we can let slide, but those things … something should be done, some people told without implicating the boy.”

“Boy’s probably right, though, ‘bout not meddlin’ with the timeline if we can help it. Don’t want to try to do somethin’ good only for Harry to, what?, pop away into nothin’?” He sighed. “At any rate, We can’t trust my brother. I don’t know what he was playin’ at with the boy, but a lot of that doesn’t sit right at all with me.”

Pel nodded slowly. “Nor me. Your brother … your brother is a great man. But for a long time now, since the Unspeakables, I’ve been of the opinion that every man who ever had a statue made of him – or gotten a Chocolate Frog card with his picture on it – was a son of a bitch in one way or another.” (*)

Ab snorted. “Too right, mate.” He stood and quietly roused Harry, who woke only enough to down his potions before flopping over, dead asleep again. “You think they’ll come for ‘im?”

The old barrister regarded the sleeping teenager for a long moment. “Yeah. Yeah, I think we can bet on that.”

30 March, 1977

Rough hands yanked Harry awake. He was being manhandled to his feet before his bleary mind screamed Macnair! Twisting his body, he attempted to find a better defensive position even as he heard Pel should, “No, Harry! It’s just Aurors!”

He stilled and looked around, his wretched eyesight straining. Three figures in crimson Auror robes surrounded his bed. Pel was on knees on his own bed, reaching out to Harry. Ab was fuming in the corner, flanked by two more Aurors.

The Auror who was manhandling Harry, completely unconcerned about the boy’s obvious half-healed injuries, had his wand raised and pointed at Harry’s chest. “I’m sorry!” Harry gasped out. “I – I thought I was being kidnapped again.” The man’s expression didn’t change. Instead, he intoned in a bored voice, “Squib who goes by the name Harry. You are under arrest for the murder of a pureblood wizard. You are to be taken to the Ministry for processing.”

Before Harry could say anything, the Auror shot a golden spell that wrapped around him like ropes before fading out of sight. As the man moved to lead him away, Harry found that he couldn’t control his body – it simply followed the man in precise, perfect steps. He tried to flex his hand into a fist. It remained limp at his side. “Ab? Pel?” He couldn’t keep his apprehension from bleeding into his voice.

“Just procedure, Harry,” Pel said, “Don’t worry, my young friend, I’ll see you as soon as I can and we’ll get this matter all cleared up. Just remember that the price is fixed, even though you, as a squib,
can’t see that.”

*What? What the fuck does that mean?*

He had no time to puzzle over Pel’s strange repetition of the Dementor’s words. Harry tromped downstairs after his captor, followed closely by the other two Aurors, his heart beating so hard that he wondered if he would have a heart attack. Behind him, the remaining Aurors were saying something to Ab about taking his statement at the Ministry, but Harry was moved towards the door before he could hear anything else. The group exited the pub into the morning sun. A few residents of Hogsmeade who were up early paused to gape at the scene.

“Oi! ‘S ‘e a Death Eater?,” an old man called out.

The lead Auror’s expression didn’t change as he pulled a feather duster from his robes that could only be a portkey. “No, sir. This one’s just a murderer.”

Chapter End Notes

(*) Quotation shamelessly adapted from the *Firefly* episode “Jaynestown.” (“It’s my estimation that every man ever got a statue made of ‘em was one kind of sombitch or another.”)
The limerick had been scratched onto Harry’s cell wall in an unsteady hand directly across from the dilapidated cot that served as his bed.

So he what? What did he do? What? What?!

Two weeks into his stay as an unwilling guest of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, he was convinced that whoever had penned the little poem had deliberately left it unfinished as an insidious method of psychological torture. He’d spent hours – days, at this point – puzzling over the final line, methodically thinking of every word that ended in ‘-ute’ and trying to give the poverty-stricken, horny young Mudchutian some closure.

Harry had finally given up trying to guess what was going happen to himself, but he at least wanted to know if the poor fellow ever managed to get laid.

Growling to himself about toots, brutes, and coots, he nestled as comfortably as he could into his cot, left as unfulfilled by yet another failed attempt to solve the limerick mystery as the Mudchute man probably was.

Two weeks today.

He wished he could say the last fourteen days had been a blur, because that at least would imply that they had passed quickly.

They had most definitely not been a blur. They’d been a snail’s-paced sulk through oscillating boredom and despair.

When the Aurors had arrested him, he’d expected to be led immediately to a dimly-lit room and interrogated by a stern-faced wizard. Such an interrogation did happen, but it wasn’t until a week after he’d been arrested. Instead, he’d spent his first seven days of imprisonment entirely in what he learned was called the “Squib Temporary Incarceration Fortified Facility,” or STIFF, located...
somewhere in the bowels of the Ministry. The cell block was a long hallway flanked by six or so muggle-looking prison cells on either side, each separated by two feet of concrete wall. Harry had been unceremoniously dumped in the first one as the only prisoner currently in residence.

He was not, however, the only resident of the STIFF. Hours after his arrival he had been shocked when he realized that a lone Dementor, its ragged cloak blowing in a wind that wasn’t there, stood watch at the darkened far end of the cell block.

*I haven’t even been found guilty of anything and they stick me with a Dementor! Those bastards!*

It suddenly occurred to Harry as he seethed over the injustice that he hadn’t heard his mother scream once, nor did the unnatural cold of the Dementor seem to touch him, though he could just make out some frost gathered on the bars of the cells closest to the wraith-like creature.

*It should not have taken me hours to notice a Dementor this close to me.*

Over the course of the next few days Harry kept dreading when he finally would feel the Dementor’s effects, but it never happened.

*Maybe giving the Kiss is the worst it can do, and since I’ve already been Kissed, I’m immune?* That explanation had felt wrong from the start – Harry doubted he would be so lucky as to have a “get past Dementors free card” – but it was all he had for the moment.

On his second day of contemplating the Dementor, Pel’s strange parting words finally made sense.

“Just remember that the price is fixed, even though you, as a squib, can’t see that.”

He was quoting what I told him the Dementor had said … and then he said I was a squib, even though he knows that I’m not…

*Can – can squibs not see Dementors?*

Harry had immediately stopped looking in the Dementor’s direction, just in case he was being watched. If squibs couldn’t see them, he could easily give away part of his disguise by his staring.

He had been concerned that his long considerations of the resident Dementor would come up in his eventual interrogation, but found instead that the two Aurors assigned to the meeting didn’t seem to care much about him at all.

A week after his arrival, Harry had been shackled with what he recognized from Macnair’s as Panoptica cuffs and led through a labyrinth of hallways and offices to a simple room that fulfilled all his clichéd expectations. Three simple chairs, low-lighting from a single oil lamp, a basic table, and nothing else. He found himself wondering if his interrogators would play “Good Auror/Bad Auror.”

Apparently he didn’t rate such games. The meeting couldn’t really even be called an interrogation. The men never introduced themselves and moved right into questions that had already been prepared in advance.

“You are the squib known as Harry?”

“Do you admit to killing Walden Macnair on the 29th of March, 1977?”
“Do you admit to knowing that Walden Macnair was a wizard when you murdered him?”

At that last, Harry had had enough. “Yes, I knew he was a wizard, but I didn’t murder him. I killed him in self-defense. He’d kidnapped me and was clearly intending to kill me if I hadn’t killed him first!”

The Aurors had been unimpressed. “So, squib, you admit to knowing that Walden Macnair was a wizard when you murdered him?”

Harry was proud that he had refrained from cursing.

And then the interrogation was over and he had been shuffled back to his cell. All his requests for a solicitor and his questions about what he could expect, when he would be tried and, above all, if Ab was okay or imprisoned as well, were stoically ignored.

That had been the last meaningful human contact he’d had.

Well, the last with the exception of Auror Alice.

On his third day of incarceration, the auror who had delivered his lunch and a round of substandard healing potions was a young woman who bounded into the cell block with an enthusiasm that contrasted sharply with the setting. Her bear cub patronus gamboled ahead of her and plopped itself down in front of the Dementor as she strode in bearing Harry’s mid-day serving of I-don’t-want-to-know-what-I’m-eating and you-call-this-piss-a-healing-potion.

He had eyed her curiously from his cot as she approached. The auror was quite young, not all that much older than him, really, with a lithe frame and feathery blonde hair done in a short pixie cut. She had a friendly round face which she was quite unsuccessfully trying to mould into the stoic Auror glare that Harry was coming to believe came standard issue with their red robes.

“Prisoner, uh, Prisoner Harry No Surname, here is your lunch!” she proclaimed with a deeper voice than Harry guessed she normally used. The woman snuck a glance at him as she slid the tray through a slot in the bars, seemingly to make certain he was suitably cowed by her Auror-ness.

A smile threatened to break out on Harry’s face. She is trying way too hard. Matching her commanding tone, he responded, “Prisoner Harry No Surname thanks the terrifying Auror for her delivery of said lunch!”

Her mouth dropped open.

Maybe I went too far with that … I’m just so bored!

Then she laughed. Hers was a tinkling, bell-like laugh that seemed to be its own patronus. Harry couldn’t stop himself from immediately warming to her.

“I did sound ridiculous, didn’t I?,” she confessed with a rueful smile. “Sorry about that, Mr. Harry.”

Hmm. She’s the first auror to actually say my name, not ‘squib.’

Harry smiled back hesitantly.

“Er, I’m Alice, by the way. I mean, Auror Fawley. Alice Fawley.” She stuck out her hand as if for a
handshake, then realized she had to stick it through the bars on his cell. The woman floundered for a moment, but Harry stood up and crossed the short space to briefly shake her proffered hand.

Wow. She’s the first person outside the Head to volunteer to shake my hand. Or even properly introduce herself.

“It’s nice to meet you, Auror Fawley,” he said politely, then paused. “Are you, um, supposed to be introducing yourself and shaking my hand and stuff?”

The woman jumped back and shot a glance at the door to the hallway beyond the cell block. “Shit! No! I mean, no I’m not, sorry. It is against policy …” The abashed look bled away into another smile. “Well, damage is done, I guess. But when it’s just us, please call me Alice. The whole ‘Auror Fawley’ thing is still pretty odd.”

Yes, Harry thought, I do like her.

“I won’t tell anyone you went against policy, Auror Faw – I mean Alice.” He looked at her more closely. She was young. “Are you pretty new at being an Auror then?”

She grinned. “Yep! It’s that obvious, huh? This is my first assignment. I mean, I’m still a trainee, but I graduated classes last week and now I start on real assignments.” Her grin morphed into a frown. “I probably shouldn’t have told you that either …” And then the smile returned. “This is just really exciting!”

My God, her expressions change back and forth as quickly as a pendulum on a clock.

“Wow, guarding me is your first assignment? I … I’m really not sure how to feel about that.”

“Well, you are pretty scary! ‘Squib-Who-Killed’ and all.” Harry pulled a puzzled face. “It’s what the papers are calling you, the ‘Squib-Who-Killed.’ Though really, in person you don’t seem scary at all, to be honest.”

Harry’s mind screeched into blankness when he heard his new moniker. He could even hear the hyphens.

He couldn’t escape the hyphens.

For the sake of my sanity, I’m going to pretend that she didn’t say that for as long as possible.

Auror Alice hadn’t noticed Harry’s horror at his newest nickname and was rambling on. “Of course all my mates are jealous that I get to deal with a real murderer on my first assignment! Midge – she’s my best friend – she said that it wasn’t all that much since you can’t do magic, but seriously, look what you’re in here for! You definitely qualify as dangerous,” she finished with relish.

Harry’s smile didn’t return as his voice turned colder. “Well, I guess I’m glad I can be a cool story for your mates or whatnot,” Alice suddenly looked sheepish. “But I’m not a murderer.” With that he picked up his lunch tray and moved to his bed to eat, his back not entirely to Alice, but enough to signal that he thought their conversation over.

He hadn’t seen Auror Alice for a few days after that, but then one evening, the day before his joke of an interrogation, she once again had entered in the company of the cub patronus bearing his dinner and potions tray.
“Um, Harry? It’s Alice. I brought you your dinner.”

Harry had to stop himself from snorting when she identified herself. Seriously, did she think he couldn’t see her through the bars? Sure, he missed his glasses, but she couldn’t have known that.

“Thanks, Alice,” he said, “I’ll get it in a bit.”

She paused, her left foot fidgeting. “I’m sorry I was insensitive the other day, I really didn’t mean to be!” Her face broke into an embarrassed smile. “I tend to let myself get away from myself, if you know what I mean … I told my boyfriend – he’s an Auror too – what I said and he said that, well, that it was kinda mean of me. So, I’m sorry.”

*She really is hard to dislike.*

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry said after a moment. “You’ve still been the nicest person in here. Nicer than most of the lot out there too, come to think of it.”

“Oh,” Alice watched him awkwardly. “Harry, why don’t you eat now? I can stay in here while you do. My patronus – that’s the spell we use to hinder the effects of the, uh, Dementor down there – can keep it nice in here for a while. I mean, I know you can’t see it, but you have to be able to feel it, yeah?”

*Shite. Maybe I should be acting more freaked out by the Dementor.*

Harry forced himself to shudder and look down, as if he wanted to hide his reaction. “Y – Yeah. Thanks Alice. That’s really … really nice of you.”

She leaned against the opposite wall while he spooned the gruel robotically into his mouth, willing himself not to taste it. A companionable silence fell, to Harry’s surprise. Alice didn’t seem the type to be able to appreciate quiet. When he was done, he passed the tray back through the grate. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it!” A quick glance down to the far end of the cell block and the smile faded. “Seriously, don’t mention it. They, uh … Well, I didn’t say it, but they … they shouldn’t have put a Dementor in here with you. I mean, you’ve not even been tried yet!”

Harry eyed her curiously. She seemed truly upset by the Dementor’s presence, which apparently was arranged just for him. He supposed he had thought that the Dementor just lived here all the time.

“Thanks,” he repeated softly.

She nodded.

*Her face looks even younger when she looks sad.*

“Oh, and one more thing not to mention,” the smile returned. “Here!” She plopped a carton of Chocolate Frogs in his hand. “It’s not much, but …”

“It’s great,” he assured her with a grin. He didn’t need the chocolate to help with the Dementor’s effects (or non-effects, in his case), but getting to eat something other than Ministry-issue gruel was the best news he gotten since his arrival at the STIFF.
After that day he’d seen her three other times, and on each visit she’d brought him chocolate. He kept attempting to wheedle information out of her, but while she was happy to help here and there, some lines even she wouldn’t cross. By the time his second week in the STIFF ended, all he knew was that Aberforth had apparently been cleared of wrongdoing somehow, and that Peloother had been in several times clamoring that he was Harry’s solicitor and therefore had a right to meet with his client. Alice wouldn’t divulge much more, though he picked up the word “squib” as she muttered an angry answer when he had wondered why Pel couldn’t get access to him.

Harry was roused from his sulking over the incomplete limerick by the unmistakable sound of the cell block door opening and closing. Must be dinner time. He hoped it was Auror Alice again. Maybe he could ask her what she thought the ending of the poem might be? Or maybe I’m not supposed to ask girls about things like that? I would have to say ‘cock’ in front of her ...

His musings were for nothing. A blank faced Auror who personified ‘nondescript’ marched in stiffly. “You are summoned.”

Oh gee, that’s not ominous.

Auror Nondescript waved his wand to unlock the cell and promptly smashed Harry up against the wall to pull his arms around his back and into the Panoptica cuffs.

Without another word he marched Harry on another long journey through the bureaucratic labyrinth to a different poorly-lit room. Waiting for him inside was the Auror who had arrested him and, Harry’s breath quickened, Barty Crouch Senior.

Well shite. This really can’t be good.

Without preamble, Crouch began to speak in the same stern tones as he had once used when he proclaimed that “the law is absolute” and forced Harry to participate in the Tri-Wizard tournament. “You have been brought here as a squib accused of murdering a wizard. We are here to evaluate your case and arrange a suitable punishment.”

“What?!?” Harry couldn’t stop himself from yelping. “I don’t even get a trial?!” Sirius didn’t get a trial either because of this bastard, he thought furiously.

Crouch frowned so hard his mustache seemed to frowning in sympathy. “All accused are afforded the right to a solicitor if they are being tried in a court. As this is simply a discussion, Mr. Pepst has no place here,” Crouch snapped.
Figures. Harry sighed. “Then, er, I suppose we should get on with it.”

Crouch cleared his throat impressively. “As you have admitted guilt in the murder of –”

“I most certainly have not,” Harry growled. “I only admitted to killing a person who had kidnapped, tortured, and planned to murder me, as well as doing the same to my … acquaintance, Mr. Pepst. This was not murder. You would know all this if any of your Aurors had actually bothered to really question me!”

Crouch glared at him. “The Ministry is aware of the circumstances of your brief and unwilling sojourn at Mr. Macnair’s property. Today they are neither here nor there,” he quelled Harry’s outburst with a chopping motion of his hand. “As I said, you have admitted guilt. Given the circumstances, the Ministry and Wizengamot leadership have jointly decided that they will permit you to be incarcerated in Azkaban Prison for no less than one year and no more than four years, after which time you will be compelled to live entirely in the Muggle world.”

Harry gaped.

“As the typical punishment for a squib who murders a wizard is either life imprisonment or the Dementor’s Kiss, you can see that the Ministry and Wizengamot have decided to be quite merciful.”

It was all just so surreal. Before even attempting to formulate a response to Crouch, Harry found himself wondering what would happen to him if he were Kissed again. Maybe nothing? I’d love to see the looks on their faces if that happened … No, bad idea. Very bad idea.

And then the rage hit. The white-hot, burning, inarticulate rage of righteous indignation that Harry knew so well.

Taking a deep, steadying breath (don’t kill Crouch, don’t kill Crouch), he kept his temper simmering safely below the surface of his demeanor.

“No thank you.”

“What?!” The arresting Auror bit out. “That Dementor drive you mad already, squib?”

Harry didn’t even look at him. “I said, no thank you. As in, I thank the Ministry and Wizengamot for their … mercy, but I’d rather go to trial.”

“Why you little shi – !”

“Auror Hooch! Please await the prisoner in the hall,” Crouch commanded. The auror slammed himself to his feet and left in an obvious huff.

Crouch considered Harry silently and slumped over a bit when he finally heaved a sigh.

“Your actions have caused many problems, young man. Problems I’m certain you cannot understand.” He actually sounded rather sad.

That … that wasn’t what Harry was expecting.

“I don’t know politics or whatever sir, but not knowing now doesn’t mean I can’t understand.”
Crouch raised an eyebrow and looked at him even more speculatively. “You realize we are a world at war?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Those who support our adversary have made it clear that they would … prefer you be found innocent.”

“What?” Crouch was right. Harry really had no idea what was going on. “The Death Eaters are on my side?!”

The man sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. It was the most human Harry had ever seen him look but for the night he died. “If you are found innocent in a public trial, they will be able to use that to advocate for even more stringent laws in favor of purebloods and as a tool for recruitment.”

Yeah, I’m still not getting this. Harry shook his head helplessly.

“Dammit, boy, all they need do is plaster your picture up, point to it, and say ‘Our society allows squibs to murder wizards with impunity! Fight for us! For a society that would never permit such an atrocity!’” He curled his hand into a fist. “If you go to trial, all those sympathetic to this Dark Lord will simply not attend that day. The remaining factions, who would naturally be more sympathetic to your case, would thus be forced to choose between morality and practicality. Do they acquit you because you acted in self defense, or do they convict you to help stave off a propaganda war they may well not be able to win?!” His fist came down hard on the table. Harry jumped a little.

Throughout Crouch’s outburst he had felt the anger in him bleed away, leaving nothing in its wake but a profound exhaustion. He didn’t want to care about political battles, or factions, or plea bargains, or propaganda wars. He wanted to sleep in the stable and wake up with Goat eating his hair and Ab yowling about getting some nasty chore completed.

That’s not so very much, is it?

Harry sighed, then raised his eyes to look into Crouch’s. He didn’t like the man. Hadn’t liked him in fourth year. But today Crouch’s eyes looked much the way he imagined his own did. So bloody tired of all this shit.

“Thank you, sir, for explaining the situation to me. I – I didn’t know any of that, you’re right,” he admitted sincerely.

“But?”

Harry smiled faintly. “But. But I won’t consent to being some sort of pawn that the Ministry can choose to just sacrifice.” He stared at the man for a moment. “And sir, forgive me for saying it, but a society that gives up its morality for the sake of – of a kind of practicality that comes only from fear might … might be a society that won’t let itself be saved.”

Crouch stared at him, eyes wide.

“I mean, look at you sir. Even I know about your dedication to upholding the law, no matter the cost,” even if the cost is your son, “but rather than being out there, in the courts and on the streets, upholding that law, you’re here, becoming the avenger of a Death Eater.” Crouch’s mouth dropped open silently. “So no, sir, I’ll not sacrifice morality for practicality, even if everyone else will.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Please arrange for my trial.”

Adrenaline coursed through Harry. His entire body was rigid in anticipation, of being cursed, or beaten, or screamed at. But Crouch just stared at him for long minutes before briskly rising and
leaving the room without another word.

14 April, 1977

Late the next night, long after Harry had picked at his dinner only to give it up as a lost cause, a soft voice woke him from an uneasy doze. “Harry? Harry? Please wake up.”

He yawned and reached for his glasses, only to remember that they were long since lost.

“Auror Alice? What is it?”

Alice was sitting on the floor of the cell block, her face almost pressed against his bars. “I, well, I’m on your watch outside tonight, and I’m not really supposed to come in if it isn’t a meal time, but … Well, I thought you should know that your trial, er, started this afternoon.”

*But they just offered me a deal yesterday!*

“What?! Why didn’t anyone tell me? It’s *my* trial! Shouldn’t I be there?!”

Alice shook her head quickly. “No, no, see, squibs can’t attend court unless they’re giving testimony. You’re slated to appear tomorrow. I thought you should know,” she repeated a little helplessly.

*Seriously!? I’m really beginning to understand Filch’s permanent bad mood.*

He forced himself to breathe. “Okay, okay. I mean, thanks Alice. For telling me. Is it – I mean, can you tell me anything about what happened today?”

She frowned. “Well, I wasn’t there, but I heard Hooch and Turner talking about it. The representative for the Ministry – Pother Futz – you know him?” Harry shook his head. “Well, Futz is a turd. Not a Death Eater turd mind you, just the regular variety. Anyhow, he presented their case against you pretty quickly. Then your solicitor gave his own testimony, then your custodian spoke, and they re-questioned the Aurors who’d looked over the scene. That took a while, I guess. So I think all that’s left is your testimony. Scheduled for first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Oh.” His heart began beating faster than he would like it to. “Alice, do … do you know, if they find me guilty, would I, would I get Kissed right away if they voted that way?”

Alice looked away. Her voice wasn’t much more than a mumble when she finally responded. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Or real soon after. I mean, you’re at least seventeen, right?”

That was enough for Harry to almost forget his impending trial. “What?! You’re joking, right? No one ever thinks I’m older than I am!” *I can’t believe I’m almost laughing right now.*

“You’re – you’re not seventeen? I mean, you look like you’re twelve –”

“Oi!”

“– but I guess I thought that since you were here like this, you – you had to be of age.” She wasn’t looking at Harry.
Harry let out a humorless laugh. “No, I’m fifteen.”

Alice didn’t say anything, just sat picking at a non-existent bit of fluff on her Auror robes. Harry floundered for something to say.

_Shit! Sad girl! What do I do with a sad girl?_ He could handle Death Eaters, dragons, and other monsters, but upset women were something for which he felt entirely unprepared.

“Are you okay, Al –”

“Shut up.”

Her hiss brought Harry up short. “I –”

“Just shut up, Harry! You could be in Azkaban tomorrow night, or worse! Don’t you dare sit here and comfort me!”

_Oh. Okay then …_

Alice sat on the floor, shaking her head for several tense moments. Finally, she looked over at Harry, her friendly face pale in the bleak torchlight of the cell block, before quickly looking away. Her patronus was nearly fading out. She gave a funny little laugh. “You know, my family thought I was a squib for the longest time.”

Harry glanced at her in surprise.

“If I ever did accidental magic, no one was around, and I never noticed. At first, it wasn’t a big deal. Mum would go on and on about how I was late bloomer. She’d just keep saying, ‘not to worry, not to worry.’”

She paused, her eyes far away. “But then Dad stopped teaching me potions as often as he once had, and then altogether, and I was sent to the gardens to work with the gardener instead. Still, ‘not to worry luv,’ Mum would tell me.”

Her smile was bitter. “But one day my grandparents didn’t seem that interested in me anymore, even though I’d always been their favorite. They started to always ask to see my little sister, not me. They’d look so surprised when I showed up with her. But ‘not to worry, luv, not to worry,’ said Mum … And then when I was nine I realized that I hadn’t been invited to any birthday parties that year, even though I had lots of friends my age whose parents had _always_ invited me to their parties in the past. Mum said not to worry, but she was starting to _sound_ worried. And then suddenly when I was ten mum stopped telling me not to worry. She … she didn’t say much at all for a long while there.”

Alice shook her head and wiped at her eyes. “It’s funny, I’d always believed her. _Always_. I’d never worried. But all at once one day I knew. I _knew_ it then, clear as I ever knew anything, that I was a squib … and that my family didn’t love me anymore.”

Her sudden laugh was sour as bile. “But then I got my Hogwarts letter and everything was right as rain again! Dad laughed as he taught me potions. I was the apple of my gran and gramp’s eyes. I went to birthday parties almost every other week. And my mum would smile and smile and _smile_ and say, ‘see, I told you not to worry, luv!’ But I still knew. That whole time … they were getting themselves ready to stop loving me.” She looked back to Harry finally, tears streaking down her
round cheeks.

“And now here I am!,” she exclaimed her bitterness so strong he could taste it. “Twenty and an Auror! Everyone is so very proud of their little late bloomer, you know. And here you are. Fifteen and … here.” She shook her head. “We’re all kinds of fucked up, aren’t we?”

Harry could only shrug and give her a small, sad smile. “Yeah, Alice. We are so many kinds of fucked up.”

Alice giggled helplessly, though she sobered soon enough. “Harry, I lied when I first came in tonight. They know I’m here – they – they sent me here. I would have come anyway,” she rushed to say, “but they sent me in. To – to try to convince you to take the deal. I think your solicitor is doing a better job at it than they expected, see, and, well, they sent me.”

*She’s too good a person to deal with this crap.* “Are you going to? Try to convince me, I mean?”

Her face hardened as she paused. This time, she wasn’t attempting to shape it into something intimidating. The effect was natural. She took a deep breath.

“Fuck them, Harry. You do what you think is right. Merlin, *fuck them all*, Harry.”

Harry felt like bursting. He wanted to kiss her or, or, *something*. “Alice, if I’m not soulless, dead, or imprisoned in the near future, you should try slumming it at the Head. Drinks are on me … but come in before nine at night, yeah? I have a curfew.”

She laughed her tinkling laugh, and her bear cub gamboled out after her.

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**15 April, 1977**

Harry hadn’t slept much the night before. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Sirius that night in the Shrieking Shack, except his godfather’s face kept changing and his body kept shrinking until Harry was looking at himself, wasted away by years in Azkaban. He tried to lighten his mood by imagining what sort of bad-ass prison tattoos he could get, but all he could see was the shrunken chest, wraith-like arms, and hollowed face that they could be inked upon.

He just couldn’t bring himself to be as worried about the possibility of getting the Kiss as he was about imprisonment in Azkaban. Sure, he’d *definitely* like to avoid the Kiss, but it was difficult to be scared of something so terrible when he’d already experienced it and come out, well, okay enough.

Before he knew it two burly Aurors he didn’t recognize were lumbering past his untouched breakfast tray and wrangling him into the now-familiar Panoptica cuffs. They said nothing as they winded him none too gently through the Ministry, wasted away by years in Azkaban. He tried to lighten his mood by imagining what sort of bad-ass prison tattoos he could get, but all he could see was the shrunken chest, wraith-like arms, and hollowed face that they could be inked upon.

The hulking Aurors – whom Harry had already nicknamed ‘Crabbe’ and ‘Goyle’ – stopped him at the door and took up guard positions.

“Er – are we supposed to go in?”
Crabbe and Goyle said nothing.

They waited. And waited. And waited.

*Programmes on the telly always make this whole process seem to go a lot faster.*

Harry was beginning to miss his cell. At least he could sit down in there.

Without any warning, the gilt Lady Justice opened her eyes, stretched, and surveyed the trio imperiously. “He is called,” she sniffed as she eyed Harry suspiciously.

*Great. Even Justice seems to have it out for me. This can’t be a good omen.*

*Harry’s heart was beating a violent tattoo against his Adam’s apple. He swallowed hard, turned the heavy iron door handle and stepped inside the courtroom.*

*Harry gasped, he could not help himself. The large dungeon he had entered was horribly familiar. He had not only seen it before, he had been here before. This was the place he had visited inside Dumbledore’s Pensieve, the place where he had watched the Lestranges sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban.*

*The walls were made of dark stone, dimply lit by torches. Empty benches rose on either side of him, but ahead, in the highest benches of all, were many shadowy figures. They had been talking in low voices, but as the heavy door swung closed behind Harry an ominous silence fell (Order of the Phoenix, ch. 7 and 8).*

Crabbe and Goyle led him to the chair in the center of the room. As soon as he was seated, the chains attached to it sprang to life and bound him, just as he had seen them bind Death Eaters in the headmaster’s Pensieve. His breath quickened.

A discreet throat-clearing to his left made him turn his head. His eyes widened when he saw Pel sitting at a small table covered in parchments off to the side. The erstwhile solicitor gave him an almost imperceptible smile. Harry tried, but could not smile back.

Squinting his blurred eyes into the darkness, he spied at the very back of the benches to his left a lone figure that could only be Ab.

*I’m not alone. I’m not alone here.*

To his right was another parchment-covered wooden table, at which sat a man nearly as small as Harry himself. His thin hair was perfectly combed over the dome of his head. Small, frameless glasses perched on his nose over a mouth with lips so thin they almost seemed non-existent. *That must be the Futz person Alice mentioned. The turd.*

Looking ahead at the benches were many more people sat, people whom he presumed to be judges, he again lamented the loss of his glasses. There were many humanoid-shapes, but not so many, he guessed, to fill much more than half of the seats in the benches. *So these must be what’s left when the people who support Voldemort don’t come.* Directly before him and more easily viewed because of the better lighting was Albus Dumbledore, looking … like Dumbledore, clad in resplendently tacky hot pink robes with violet and orange stars. They reminded Harry of the design on Mr. Weasley’s
Billywigs shirt, and clashed horribly with the plum-colored robes everyone else seemed to be wearing. Barty Crouch Sr., frowning and looking rather constipated, was on Dumbledore’s left, while another wizard, sitting so far back in the shadows that Harry couldn’t make out his features, sat on the headmaster’s right.

_Dumbledore’s presiding over my trial?! This is great!_

Memories of his few conversations with the 1976 version of the man popped into his head.

... _This is great, right? Maybe? Probably?_

“Very well,” Dumbledore began genially. “Now that the accused is present, we may conclude. Are you ready?” Receiving a curt nod from a young woman sitting down the row of benches, Dumbledore addressed the court, his eyes on Harry.

“Mr. Harry No Surname, you are today being charged with Crime 246, that is, the murder of a wizard by a squib. Your solicitor, Mr. Pepst, has entered a plea for you of innocent in light of extenuating factors, namely self-defense and defense of a wizard during the commission of crimes allegedly committed by the victim, namely Crimes 21a and 48, grievous assault and kidnapping. Do you wish to contest this plea?” Dumbledore’s tone sounded like he was asking a schoolboy if he really wanted to persist in claiming he was innocent of some prank. He looked down his spectacles at Harry, a stern, parental expression on his face.

“No, sir, I don’t. That – that sounds about right.”

“Before this court renders a verdict, it is my obligation by law to ask if you would like to speak in your own defense, though I must warn you, doing so allows the Ministry representative prosecuting the right to interrogation, as well as any of the judges here.”

_What do I say? Shite, I don’t know how to talk to a bloody court!_

He cast a desperate look at Pel, who sighed and gave the tiniest of shrugs. _It’s up to you_, that shrug said.

_Thanks a lot._

Harry squared his shoulders and looked at Crouch, then Dumbledore. “Yes, sir, I would like to speak in my own defense. And I’ll answer any questions Mr. Futz asks me.”

Dumbledore looked a bit startled that Harry knew Futz’s name, but graciously motioned to the man in question to begin.

Futz stood and smoothed out his unwrinkled tweed robes. “We have already been given a complete overview of your crimes. I will not waste any more of these good witches’ and wizards’ time by going over well-trodden ground.” He nodded toward the benches in a way that was probably supposed to have been politely deferential but seemed obsequious instead. “I have but one question for you.” Harry held his breath. This sounded like he had some damning evidence. “Did you, a squib, kill Walden Macnair, a pureblood wizard?”

Harry caught Pel roll his eyes. _Seriously? They must already know this!_ “Er, well yes sir, I did. I’ve already admi –”
“There you have it!” Futz proclaimed triumphantly.

The man to Dumbledore’s right leaned forwards and nodded, a grim smile on his face. He was an older man whose muscular frame looked awkward in his business robes, reminding Harry of a Ludo Bagman who hadn’t let himself go.

“There you have it, Mr. Futz, but I do have a rather more pertinent question whose answer we don’t already know,” came a cultured voice from near the back that dripped with sarcasm.

The beefy unknown at the front scowled, while Crouch sighed, his eyes downcast. Dumbledore quirked an eyebrow. “Yes, the court recognizes Mr. Potter.”

Harry started violently.

Oh my God, they recognize me! Shite, shite, shite! What do I do?

But the cultured voice was speaking again. “Mr. Harry, I’m curious. How many times did you stab Walden Macnair?”

Wait.

That man’s Mr. Potter? But my dad is still in school, he can’t be here!

“Mr. Harry?”

Holy shite, that must be my grandfather or something.

“Mr. Harry!”

“Sorry, sir, I – I’m just a bit nervous. Um, I … I’m actually not sure the number sir. It was several times,” Harry finally managed.

Futz interrupted in annoyance. “The court has already been informed of this! Evidence 15c clearly states that the number was eight. Eight times the squib stabbed him.” He huffed. “I thought you were going to ask something we didn’t already know, Potter.”

Potter ignored the man utterly and addressed Harry again. “I see. Why, Mr. Harry, did you stab him so many times?”

Harry blinked. He had not even thought of being asked this question. “Er – well, sir, I don’t really know. I was scared, see, and I had to get out of there to help A – my custodian – I’d heard him screaming earlier – and Macnair was big and could do magic. I guess …” He petered off thoughtfully. “I guess all I was thinking at the time was that I wanted him to fall down and stop moving so that I could get out. Sir.”

Whatever answer Potter (my grandfather?) and the rest of the court had expected him to give, this wasn’t it.

Crouch looked at him sharply. “Are you claiming that you left the cell to try and come to the aid of another wizard in distress? Our records do not show that your custodian had been kidnapped and your solicitor did not address it!”
“No – I mean yes! I mean, yes, I left to go and help the person I thought at the time was my custodian. See, Macnair mentioned something about how they really wanted the old man, and then I heard one of the other men call him that too. Since they took us from the pub in the middle of the night, I figured the old man had to be my custodian. I didn’t realize they meant Pel – I mean, Mr. Pepst – until I found him after they had Crucioed him.” Harry finally stopped for a breath. *Damn, I probably could have said that a lot better.*

“We were unaware that you attempted to rescue Mr. Pepst,” a woman’s voice said softly. “I suppose I assumed you simply happened upon him in the course of your escape.”

“Does it really change anything?,” the burly man at the front asked.

The woman puffed up. “Yes, Minister, I – ”

“No,” he answered his own question firmly. “It does not.”

*That must be the Minister for Magic!*

“Regardless of his intentions for his custodian or Mr. Pepst, that does not change the fact that he murdered Walden Macnair!” Futz cried. The Minister seemed visibly upset. Crouch was staring at wall behind Harry, and Dumbledore … Dumbledore just sat there.

*Fuck them, the memory of Alice whispered in his ear. Fuck them.*

“I did not murder Walden Macnair!” Harry would have been on his feet if the chains on the chair allowed it.

The court went deadly silent.

“I didn’t murder him. I killed him. There’s a difference, you have to see that!” His head buzzed and his hands curled into fists.

The Minister and several members of the court scoffed. Harry glanced quickly at Pel, who nodded slightly and smiled at him sadly.

*Fuck them.*

“I’m allowed to speak in my defense, yes?”

It was Crouch, not Dumbledore, who looked at him and nodded. The headmaster’s gaze, on the other hand, was trained on the shadowy form of his brother.

Harry breathed deeply, willing his body to stop shaking, his voice to be steady. He was gaping at himself internally, completely at a loss for what to say but preparing himself to say it nonetheless. “I’d appreciate it if you would just listen to me for a few minutes. A few minutes out of your whole lives. *Please.*”

*I have to make them understand.*

“Please, imagine this.” *Deep breath.* “Imagine it was just another day. A good day. You spent time with a friend, got your work done, had a nice dinner, and went to bed. But you wake up in the middle of the night with a huge man on top of you, in your home, in your bed, and before you can
even scream he hits you hard and knocks you out. You wake up again, this time alone in locked cell in a place you don’t recognize. You don’t know where you are or why you’re there, but you’re pretty sure it isn’t for good things. Then the man returns, and you realize he’s a man who’s already tried to kill you once.”

Harry tried to calm his heartbeat. It didn’t really work, but his words were coming out clear and strong.

“He takes his time with you, telling you the sorts of things he plans on doing to you, to your body. And then he takes out his knife and stabs you in the chest. You think you’re going to die as you watch the blood run down your shirt, soak into puddles on the ground below. But he hasn’t hit anything important. He wants it to last after all.”

Harry licked his lips. Several of the judges were staring at him, but he couldn’t stop himself from taking the time to interpret their expressions.

“Then the man’s friend calls him, and you realize that it isn’t just you, but that another person you care about has been taken by these men, these men who do things like stab kids. The man leaves. And then you hear the screaming of your friend as they torture him. But you can’t get out. You’re stuck in the room, listening to your friend being tortured. Then you realize that the men didn’t think you were a threat enough to even search you, and you find that you still have the knife your custodian once gave you. The man returns, talking about his plans for you again. He has a knife of his own out, but not his wand.”

Harry paused and looked at Crouch.

“This is your chance. Your only chance.”

The huge dungeon seemed to be holding its breath.

“When the man rushes at you with his knife out, you meet him with yours, and yours is the one that lands. But he’s so much bigger than you, has powers you don’t. You stab him again. And again. You stab him until you’re sure he’s not going to move again. And now you can go and save your friend.”

Harry shrugged helplessly.

“Tell me, tell me please, Mr. Crouch, Minister, judges, anyone. Did you have any other choice that could have led to you and your friend living through the day? Or should you have just laid in your cell and taken the torture, let yourself get stabbed by a crazed Death Eater, hoping that someone else would come and save you? Did you do the right thing by fighting back against a man – a Death Eater – who tried to kill a kid, who took him from the safety of his bed simply because he wanted to? I bet most of you are thinking that yeah, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

He spied several judges nodding slowly. Deep breath.

“Now imagine that you’re me. You’re a squib.” Crouch’s eyes grew wider and the Minister tensed. “Are you in the wrong now? Because if you could absolve yourselves of guilt but you can’t absolve me, when there’s only one bloody thing different between us…”

Fuck them.
“... well then, honestly, I think that you’re on a different side in this war than the one you’re claiming to be on.”

With that he sent a pointed look at the judges, tilted his chin up, and let the rising din of dozens of clamoring voices wash over him like so much water over a rock.

The indignant shouts of judges continued for several minutes, unabated by Dumbledore’s ever more desperate strikes of his gavel. Pel took the opportunity to inch closer to Harry and gave him a grin.

“Damn, my young friend, you certainly know how to put a pixie in their pants!”

Harry didn’t have it in him to smile back. “Do you think it helped? Is Ab okay? What are my chances? How’s the rest of the case goin –”

Futz’s strident tones cut across the chaos. “Chief Warlock! Accused squibs are not allowed conferences with solicitors within the courtroom!”

“Always was a ruddy snitch,” Pel grumbled and moved back behind his table, blinking innocently at Dumbledore.

Eventually, after several more bangs of his gavel and a fully deployed arsenal of chastising looks, the headmaster managed to get the courtroom under control.

“Now then,” he continued as if nothing had happened, “Mr. Harry, would you care to add anything to your testimony?”

One of the judges snorted nervously.

“No sir. Thank you, but I think I’ve said all I really can.”

There was another snort, this one more appreciative and coming from the area where Harry knew only Ab was sitting.

“Well, all that remains is for the court to hear closing remarks. Mr. Futz?”

Futz rose and straightened his robes. “Despite what the accused may imply, Witches and Wizards of the Wizengamot, this is not a trial about politics. Indeed, it does not need to be, for the Law. Is. Clear.” His last three words were emphasized by his fist pounding on wood. “Crime 246 is governed by Ashby’s Law of 1431, which states that it is “illegal for a squib to take the life of a pureblood wizard.” There are no clauses, no addendums, no extenuating circumstances described. Did the accused kill Walden Macnair? Yes! He freely, even proudly, admits it himself!”

The man began to pace, affecting an air of thoughtful contemplation.

“Do some of you disagree with this law? Yes, I imagine you do. That is, perhaps, understandable. But today we are convened as a court of law, not as a legislative body. You are here, by our charge, not to make new laws, but only to interpret the existing law as it pertains to a given case! And, fellow witches and wizards, it is not a hard law to interpret. You must find the accused guilty of murder. Of that, there is no question.”
It was well done, Harry had to admit. At the end he nicely parodied genuine concern, even regret, for the heavy task before the court.

His stomach roiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Futz,” Dumbledore said gravely. “Mr. Pepst, do you wish to speak on the accused’s behalf?”

Pel stood up slowly, his head nodding. “Yes, thank you, Chief Warlock. Witches and Wizards, I am here to argue this case because of the accused. Had he not escaped his kidnapper and torturer, he would not have found me and given me the chance I needed to incapacitate the late Mr. Folteren. I am a wizard whose life was saved by a squib.”

He pulled a puzzled face. “I’m not sure how many other wizards can say the same thing. Indeed,” a bitter little laugh punctuated his pause, “depending on how today goes for the accused, I may well be the last!”

Some judges scowled.

“I do, however, believe that Mr. Futz is quite incorrect when he claims this trial is not about politics. You should certainly see through that. After all, did we not just last week convict a Madame Olive Hornby, a Ministry agent in the employ of the DMLE, for colluding with Death Eaters by concealing a wardreader in the Hog’s Head Inn and Pub during the course of a routine Ministry inspection, a crime that directly facilitated the kidnapping and torture of both myself and the accused?”

What?! That Ministry bint who inspected the pub was involved in this?! What?!

“And now you sit here in judgement of a case that touches directly into the very heart of the war we are being called to fight against a Dark Lord. No, members of the court, I suspect this case is all about politics.”

Pel sighed.

“But it shouldn’t be. You heard the accused only moments ago, speaking a truth about our world that hurts to hear. But you should hear it.” He paused and seemed to make eye contact with every person sitting on the benches before finishing somberly. “And you should heed it. Thank you.”

As Pel returned to his seat, Dumbledore addressed the court. “You have heard testimony, viewed evidence, and listened to final considerations. The time has come to vote. All those in favor of conviction?”

Harry’s heart was in his throat as his eyes frantically scanned the crowd of judges before him. Slowly, as though no one wanted to be first, the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot began raising their lighted wands. Harry forced himself not to cringe when Crouch’s wand lit. It seemed … it seemed like every judge was voting for his conviction! He was too shocked for his heart to break when he vacantly observed Dumbledore raising and lighting his own wand.

“All those in favor of acquittal?”

Four lonely lights from the back benches.

Four.
And none from the vicinity of the Potter who had spoken.

“The accused is found guilty of Crime 246, as per the laws of wizarding Britain,” Dumbledore pronounced slowly.

No. No. This … this isn’t happening. This isn’t happening! How … how could they do this? How could they!

Barty Crouch Sr.’s words echoed in his head. “Do they acquit you because you acted in self defense, or do they convict you to help stave off a propaganda war they may well not be able to win?”

I guess I have an answer to that. Oh God. Oh God. He felt like he was going to vomit, like he’d faint if the chains holding him fast let him go and he tried to stand up. And below his shock and terror, there welled a burning, churning disappointment in them all, in Dumbledore and Crouch, the Minister, the unknown Potter, the whole bloody wizarding world.

How could they?

But Dumbledore had cleared his throat and was speaking again, addressing him. Harry rallied everything he was to keep his back straight and face expressionless.

“The two traditional punishments for those convicted of this crime are either life imprisonment in Azkaban Prison or execution by the Dementor’s Kiss. At this time, the convicted may express a preference for either, is he so desires.”

They – they want me to pick between those options?

To those watching him closely, which was most in the courtroom at this point, his eyes seem to glaze over for a few moments. Ab, who burned with his own rage alone on the spectators’ benches, however, recognized it. He’d seen that vacant look fall over the boy a few times when the kid was getting ready to ask him so damn fool question about magic. The little idiot was thinking, and thinking hard.

Harry’s eyes snapped back into focus. The shock had already begun to ebb away, leaving only incredulous fury and biting disappointment roaring in its wake.

Alice had it right.

Fuck them all.

“Thank you, Mr. Dumbledore.” A few gasps at the perceived – and frankly intended – impertinence echoed in the otherwise silent room. “Given the two options you’re offering, there is only one choice to make. The lot of you seem intent on making me your sacrificial lamb, just like Macnair wanted me to be his victim. I’m not really interested in being either.” He spat the words. “I would much rather die quickly than be tortured to death slowly, whether it’s him doing it or you all.” He couldn’t contain a sour chuckle. “Maybe there really isn’t much of a difference.”

He shook his head and then made absolutely sure that he stared hard into the eyes of the Minister, Dumbledore, and Crouch in turn.

“Therefore, of the two options, I prefer to be administered the Dementor’s Kiss.”
Bedlam reigned in Courtroom 10.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks so much for reading and for your comments.
A note on wizarding law: JKR consistently presented the laws and legal system of wizarding Britain as capricious, biased, ad hoc, and amateur (in terms of those giving judgement). I attempted to follow this as much as I could, hence the representation of the legal system in this chapter is one characterized by ineptness and caprice.

XI. More Balls Than Brains

15 April, 1977

_Last time on The Second String:_

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He made absolutely sure that he stared hard into the eyes of the Minister, Dumbledore, and Crouch in turn.
“Therefore, of the two, I prefer to be administered the Dementor’s Kiss.”

Bedlam reigned in Courtroom Ten.

Harry was immediately ushered out to the hallway he had waited in before his trial. Through the chaos he was able to catch Dumbledore saying something about the convicted being removed while sentencing was debated.

Whichever.

His legs wanted to shake desperately but Aurors ‘Crabbe’ and ‘Goyle’ were leading him out and he refused to let them see him break down. Goyle’s hands, he noticed vaguely, were far gentler this time than when he’d led him here ... was it less than an hour ago?

Holy shite, what did I just do?

A stoic Crabbe took the same position as he had before and was mirrored by Goyle, whose staunch implacability was belied by the little glances he kept stealing at Harry. Harry ignored him and wallowed deep in the darkening whirlpool of his own mind.

I can’t believe I did that. They’re going to have me Kissed. Dementors, oh God, Dementors .. I don’t want to die, I don’t want to leave, I have Ab now, please, I don’t want – it’s not fair, please, why is this happening, how could they –

Finally, the man cracked. “Kid? Kid, ah, can I ask how old you are?”

Harry roused himself enough to pretend not to notice Crabbe’s eyes dart over in interest.

“I’m fifteen.”

And my life is probably over. God, Merlin, please, I don’t –

“Oh.” Goyle looked away and said nothing else for a very long time.

Aberforth, meanwhile, remained forgotten in the shadows and watched the crowing of the Wizengamot. As a member of the public he certainly wasn’t supposed to witness the court’s deliberations, but he’d learned early in his life that being completely forgettable had its advantages, especially when dealing with idiots. Thus, while the few reporters who’d camped on the other side of the courtroom were ejected, Ab was left to eavesdrop to his heart’s content.

Some members were screaming at each other, others strutted about trying to be logical in loud claims dripping with condescension. A few, like Crouch, were simply sitting silently, eyes wide, seeming deep in thought or shock. It was the sort of scene that should have him snorting in amused derision.
His goats had better deportment than these sad sacks of the so-called elite.

But nothing about today is funny.

His ears strained to pick up comments from those whom he knew really called the shots. Of course, Albus had told him to expect something like this to happen. They had planned for the boy to be found guilty, there was nothing for that, dammit all, but neither of them could have predicted the little fool would so audaciously and effectively shame the collective political powerhouses of wizarding Britain. He essentially told them that if they found him guilty they should just sod off and join Voldemort, of all things!

“I’ll always choose head-on,” the boy had said to him the night of his first fight with Macnair. Ab shook his head in bemused wonder. Well, you hopeless fool, at least you’re a man of your bloody word.

“Why are we arguing at all? I say give the squib what he wants and let’s go home!,” one reedy voice shouted over the din.

Madam Marchbanks, who was one of the few to vote acquittal, huffed herself up. “Why? Why?! Maybe you have no problem sending a fifteen year old child to have his soul removed, but some of us aren’t contemplating getting a tattoo on our arms!”

The reedy-voiced man’s indignant reply was drowned out by hushed exclamations and shocked gasps after the woman observed Harry’s age. Apparently the fucks couldn’t even be bothered to pay attention to the first bloody page of the file. Yes, you shits, you’re condemning a fifteen year old who still ain’t even shaving yet.

“C-Can we take his age into account?” Potter the Ponce stuttered, suddenly looking pale and nauseated. Apparently the Sleekeazy’s tycoon hadn’t pulled himself away from his hair care products long enough to note the boy’s age. Good. That’s your fucking grandson you were so quick to condemn.

“How young is too young to be our scapegoat?” Barty Crouch choked out rhetorically, sounding sick. His laugh was so bitter that most in the courtroom stopped and looked at him in concern. “It doesn’t matter and we all know that. We tried to make him a scapegoat, but instead he’ll be a martyr.” Ab quirked an eyebrow at that. Maybe Crouch had a bit more to him than he had thought.

“Well to hell with his preferences then!,” came another voice. “You’re all acting like we have to give him the Kiss. We don’t! Let’s just chuck him in Azkaban for life and when the war’s over we can commute his sentence if we want!” Desperate voices raised in support of this.

Albus shot a quick glance his way. Your turn, Albus. Rope ‘em in and mind you, make it good. Ab tried to ignore the worried way his hands were grasping at his robes. Don’t fuck this up, you bastard.

“I’m afraid that’s no longer as viable a plan as it was,” Dumbledore began, sounding remorseful. “Records of the official court proceedings are, of course, available to the public, and reporters were in attendance for the trial. By tomorrow morning – perhaps even tonight – all of wizarding Britain will know what the boy said, why he did what he did, and our response.” He sighed heavily. “The problem will remain, my friends. I fear that any significant punishment – Azkaban included – will be twisted into proof of our ideals’ similarity to those of the Dark Lord. The people will know. And they
will judge us. And, I fear, they will act on that judgment.” Albus’ voice was solemn, the voice of long-time statesman and one-time war hero. It was the perfect tone to sell the load of shite they were trying to convince the Wizengamot to buy. Not the way we planned to do it, but a nice way to respond to the boy daring them to give him the Kiss.

Harold Minchum, the Minister, started nodding quickly, looking like someone had punched him in the gut.

Griselda Marchbanks piped up, almost as if on cue, though Ab knew she wasn’t aware of the brothers’ scheme. “From what I have seen today,” she began in that soft voice of hers that was studded with steel, “I am unconvinced our ideals are not as dissimilar as I would want to the Dark Lord’s.” A stern glare hushed the rising protests. “Don’t fool yourselves, my friends. Every single one of us knows that if it was one of our children, one of our grandchildren, who was involved in this mess we would be singing to the rooftops about his bravery, his fortitude, his heroism. We’d probably be sitting here debating whether or not he deserved a third-class Order of Merlin. Not Azkaban, not the Kiss!”

Silence fell, and the Wizengamot members shifted in their seats.

“I understand, Madame Marchbanks,” came the heavy voice of Elphias Doge. “But we all knew how the Dark Lord would make use of the boy’s acquittal. For the greater good we had to –”

“Worthless, sycophantic gob as always, Doge.”

Marchbanks laughed. ‘The ‘greater good,’ Elphias? Yes, yes, I can see that. But after today, I cannot help but wonder what it will take to finally subdue that elusive beast! If we keep on as we have been, sacrificing decency and right for the sake of this greater good, I suspect when we finally track it down we’ll discover only the corpse of a thing we killed long ago with a thousand arrows made from all the littler evils that we perpetrated and allowed.”

“Well fuck me, Zelda, you sexy old cat! Bet Albus’ arse is smarting from that one.

Minchum finally found his voice. “Well, Crouch, you offered him that pretty good deal the other day, right? Bit of prison time and then exile? Couldn’t we just sentence him with the deal? That wouldn’t be too hard on him and we could differentiate ourselves from Voldemort.”

Ab perked up. This bit was the trickiest, and he could only thank Merlin that wizarding Britain had so many ridiculous laws still on the books.

Crouch shook his head, mustache bristling. “Paragraph 94, subsection alpha of the charter for trials of 1763 is specific on the matter and has never been officially repealed. The Wizengamot cannot use a punishment already refused in the form of a pre-trial offer for sentencing. Thus any shorter term of incarceration and/or banishment to the Muggle world are both off the table for us. Had we only offered him one of those punishments, things would be different, but ...” He paused thoughtfully. “However, nothing explicitly prohibits a convicted criminal from accepting the offered deal up to and until the point of actual sentencing.”

“Fascinating,” Albus murmured, “Mr. Pepst, you have been silent during all this. Would your client be interested, do you think, in accepting the previously offered deal? Surely he’ll find it more amenable than the Dementor’s Kiss or a lifetime in Azkaban.”
You’re on, Pel. Make it good, keep it simple.

Just as they had planned, Pel stood up and regarded the Wizengamot thoughtfully. “I cannot speak for my client, as I have not been given the opportunity to meet with him since his arrest.” Scowls and some embarrassed glances graced the faces of the court. Ab gritted his own teeth. I’d feel so much better about this if we could have told the lad about the plan. “That said, knowing Mr. Harry as I do, I suspect that he would throw the deal back in your faces.”

As the assorted protestations of the court died down, Pel paused and sighed heavily. “Witches and Wizards, I’m afraid he’s seen you now. He knows exactly what you’re willing to sacrifice — including him. I think it was apparent to all today that he’s not overly impressed with the august body of the ancient Wizengamot. That is a brave, principled, decent young man whom you just convicted, a young man who knows what he did was not wrong, and he will never admit that it was.” The old solicitor shrugged and reclaimed his seat as he surveyed the court. “He’ll take no deal.”

“This is a bloody nightmare! What the hell can we do?,” Minchum exclaimed.

Albus steepled his fingers and sat back in his chair. Now or never, you bastard. “Our choices are, alas, quite limited at this juncture. We can give him the Kiss or life imprisonment, but I believe we all now understand the political and public relations boondoggle that such a sentence would become for the Ministry, one we must avoid given our precarious position of late. We cannot give him a shorter sentence in Azkaban or banishment because of the terms of the deal once offered. As we found him guilty, we cannot simply resolve not to punish him. Lastly, we must deal with the severe consequences to the war that would come with our perceived lenience and sympathy for a squib.”

“Shite,” Aberforth heard Potter whisper. “This is impossible.”

Albus’ eyes were twinkling. “Perhaps not, Mr. Potter. Perhaps not.”

Crabbe and Goyle both jumped a little when the golden Lady Justice snapped into life and addressed them. “Bring in the convicted for sentencing,” she said gravely without deigning to look at Harry.

Harry, for his part, had eventually slipped into an unfeeling stupor as he stood and waited for the Wizengamot to deliberate his fate. It was the same nothingness he used to shelter in when Vernon was in a particularly vile mood. Apathy, he had found, was sometimes the best shield.

Before his stupor set in, he had briefly toyed with the idea of proclaiming to all that he was a wizard, and that their stupid law didn’t apply to him. It was so very tempting, and he figured he could still do so if he absolutely had to, but Pel’s panicked warning about never telling anyone about himself kept coming back to him. Sure, he could probably reveal his magic without disclosing the time travel, but Harry knew himself well enough to know that he was a terrible liar, and he had no idea how to convincingly explain why he hadn’t attended Hogwarts and why he wouldn’t do so now. Maybe, maybe if there was time before the Kiss, he could talk to Ab and Pel and come up with a good story …

The beefy Aurors grasped him by the arm once again – where the hell do they think I’m going to go? – and led him through the large door, though this time both their hands only kept perfunctory on his
arm. A calming chant ran through his mind. *Keep your back straight and your face dry.*

When they neared the chair, Harry was surprised that he wasn’t forced back down and chained. Instead, Crabbe and Goyle kept ahold of him as he faced the assembled Wizengamot. *Back straight, face dry.*

Dumbledore peered down out him from over his half-moon spectacles. “Mr. Harry, you have been found guilty of violating law 246, a crime for which life imprisonment or the Dementor’s Kiss is typically proscribed. Between the two, you have elected to be punished via the Kiss. Do you wish to alter your decision?”

*Back straight, face dry.*

“No sir, I do not.” *Good. I don’t think my voice even shook.*

“The court acknowledges your choice,” Dumbledore said slowly. “However, some final considerations have guided the Wizengamot’s ruling on your punishment.” *Huh?* “Although Azkaban or the Kiss have been traditionally used for such crimes, no law requires them to be the only punitive measures that we consider. Moreover, it was discovered in the course of our deliberations that no minor squib has ever been sentenced to either. This, we admit, concerns us.”

Dumbledore leaned forward. “Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that your actions, while criminal and foolhardy, nonetheless were instrumental in saving the life of a pureblood wizard, Mr. Peloothor Pepst. Law 246 was specifically designed for violent, insolent squibs with no respect for the wizarding world, those who would dare raise a hand against wizards with no care for the value of magical lives. You, however, have shown through your concern for your custodian and Mr. Pepst that this, at least, is not a crime of which you are guilty. Indeed, the very fact that you willingly entered into a Ministry-sanctioned custodial agreement earlier this year demonstrates your willingness to conform to Ministry procedures for one of your inferior social status.”

Dumbledore paused, and Harry’s mind floundered in confusion.

“Thus the Wizengamot found itself in a quandary. Given your youth, clean criminal record otherwise, and obviously high regard for members of British wizarding society, we have decided upon the following sentence.”

*Back straight, face dry.*

“Mr. Harry No Surname, you are hereby sentenced to Auror-enforced parole until the day when you come of age. You will submit yourself to regular meetings to ensure that you are living with respect for the laws and traditions of wizarding Britain in such a way that accords with your inferior status. Moreover, to help instill in you the proper respect for your betters in this society, you are sentenced to 600 hours of service to wizards at times and places to be determined, though we shall take into account the limited mobility of squibs when devising your assignments. Should you violate any of the terms of your sentence, this body shall reconvene to deliberate on whether you should be incarcerated for the rest of your natural life or given the Kiss. So ends Wizengamot Criminal trial 1977.141.” The sound of his gavel echoed through Courtroom 10.

*What?*
The members of the Wizengamot were slowly filing out.

“What?” Harry asked dumbly.

Goyle gave him a little smile. “It’s over kid. Guess they didn’t want to kill you after all, huh?”

Harry felt like he couldn’t stop blinking. “But – but I compared them to Voldemort! … I don’t, I don’t understand, I –”

Crabbe finally broke character and actually laughed. “Oh, we noticed that, kid. Thought some of ‘em were goin’ ta kill you on the spot.”

This was too surreal. “Wha –, so – so what do I do now?”

A gentle hand on his shoulder had him turning around. “Now,” said Pel, “we get to go and fill out the forms for your parole release.”

As Harry threw his arms around a startled Peloother, he caught sight of Ab discreetly leaving the courtroom. The man turned and shook his head when he saw Harry watching him. Bloody fool, that shake seemed to say, but then Ab snorted and cracked a ghost of a smile before disappearing through the door.

The next two hours were spent filling out forms for his parole and listening to three different Ministry representatives drone on about the terms of his release. Harry didn’t listen to any of them really, and coasted through the processing with his mind nearly blank. Pel thankfully spoke, and nodded, and seemed to do all sorts of helpful solicitor-y things. Please Pel, just explain all this to me later. I can’t care right now. I just can’t.

And then Pel grinned at him and led him to the DMLE’s public Floo. A handful of powder later and Harry was back in the Head, Pel’s arm keeping a firm grip that kept him from falling over.

Dalcop, Wigol Palter, and Ab were sitting in the otherwise empty pub, early afternoon sunlight streaming in through the windows whose curtains were, for the first time Harry could remember, pulled back to let in the light.

Dalcop cheered when Harry appeared, “You showed ‘em, lad!,” Wigol clapped and grinned silently, and Ab just regarded him seriously as he vacated Pel’s regular seat. “Pel, your drinks are on the house today. I’ll take him.”

With a quiet “Well done, my young friend,” Pel departed from Harry’s side. Harry could just nod absently and stare at Ab.

The old bartender shook his head again. “Dammit lad, you’ve really got more balls than brains, don’t you?” He sighed. “Come on, your ruddy fool. I’ll explain what happened today.”
Harry dropped onto his straw bed gratefully as Goat virtually galloped over to his side and began to make short work of his long hair. “Missed you too, Goat,” he murmured.

Ab snorted and took a seat opposite him. “You’re probably wonderin’ what the hell is goin’ on, yeah? You want the long or the short version?” Ab took in Harry’s glassy eyes and shook his head. “Aye, short version it is, I think.”

He sat back comfortably. “We figured there was no way you’d not get in trouble for this once the Aurors came. The Ministry can’t let a squib who’d killed a wizard for whatever reason just go. Heard you had a visit from Crouch and I ’spect you got a feel for the politics,” he spat the word, “of your case, yeah?”

At Harry’s nod, he continued. “Well, me, Pel, and my bastard brother came up with a plan to make sure you got off light. Was a huge gamble, sure as shit it was, a fuckin’ massive gamble, but … See, the way it was supposed to go was you’d get convicted – law’s clear, after all, that fuck Futz was right on that score – and then during sentencin’ deliberations Albus would make ‘em think about all the negative publicity they could get for sendin’ a kid to Azkaban, ‘specially given the circumstances of your crime. Pel had played up that your actions helped save his life, which helped show that you aren’t some squib revolutionary who doesn’t give a toss about wizards. We, well we didn’t know that you thought it was me that was kidnapped, not Pel. Your testimony really helped then too, since it made it look like you valued your custodian’s life more’n your own at the time.”

He gave Harry a strangely soft look then took a long pull on his hip flask. “I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you any of this. Pel kept tryin’ to get access to you, but, well, you know how things go. Would’a been suspicious if Albus had come, and there’s no way they’d let me in.” Harry just nodded. “Anyway, we had the sentence you ended up gettin’ planned out in advance. It’ll play well with the papers – you might’a noticed all that rot in there about teaching you your place and whatnot. Helps combat what the other side might say about the Ministry valuing squibs too much. Instead, it looks like the Ministry is being merciful, yeah, but is still rubbin’ your nose in the dirt.”

Harry nodded dumbly. This made some sense, but … “Wait, why was it a huge gamble? It sounds mostly logical to me.”

Ab laughed long and bitter. “Lad, the whole fuckin’ thing hinged on making the ‘Gamot and the Ministry terrified of the negative publicity they’d get if they were too hard on you. Think about it! You’ve been a squib long enough to see the flaw here!”

Harry thought. The faces of the people in the Head the night of his fight with Macnair popped to mind, the furious Yarda, and the nicer patrons who still hadn’t helped him … then Cordwaine the cobbler, Celeste the perfect shop girl at Gladrags, the Aurors who watched his cell, who – but for Alice – didn’t even really look at him … his teenaged father bullying him, Sirius calling him ‘Squibbulus’… Clarity suddenly burned through him.

Oh.

Oh God.

“It was a huge gamble because you had to make them think that people would be angry about what happened to me, angry I was sent to Azkaban, angry enough to – to do something, when … when they probably wouldn’t have really cared one way or the other.” His voice sounded like a dead thing
to his ears.

Ab nodded gravely. “Aye. We know that some might’a felt bad when they read the story in the *Prophet*, but then they’d have just shaken’ their heads and gone about their day. The squib movements of the ‘60s have been washed away by the advance of this Dark Lord, so it’s not as if the government would have protests to deal with. No, lad, no one would’a cared, not enough as to do anythin’. But we had to make those fucks in the ‘Gamot believe they would.’”

Harry’s stomach fluttered violently as he thought about the terrible gamble the three men had made with his life.

“Wait – even if they were nervous about bad publicity, why didn’t they just give me a shorter sentence in Azkaban or something?”

“Well,” Ab said a bit grudgingly, “my brother’s a bastard, but he’s not stupid. Found some stupid rule in trial proceedings that’s never been changed. Ignored, yeah, but never changed. Said that convicts can’t be punished with the terms of any deal that they’d been offered and refused prior to their conviction –”

“Dumbledore was behind the offer Crouch gave to me, wasn’t he?” Harry guessed shrewdly.

Ab nodded. “Aye. Made sure to write it up with both prison time and exile. Crouch is a stickler for any rule he finds, too. Once Albus pointed that old law out to him right before the trial, we knew he wouldn’t be able to keep mum about it. That made sure that they couldn’t give you a lesser sentence in prison or exile you from the wizarding world.”

Harry looked at his hands. “I – I thought today that Dumbledore had decided not to help me.” The vision of his old headmaster solemnly raising and lighting his wand seemed burned into his soul. He shied away quickly after prodding gingerly at the hurt that perceived betrayal had caused to well inside him.

Ab was silent for a few moments. “My brother …,” he finally began, “is a political animal. Not a bad one, no, not really, but those types of beasts have different rules than simpler creatures like us do.”

He wordlessly offered his hip flask to Harry, who likewise took a long pull. The whiskey inside burned going down his throat, but he barely noticed.

“So, that was the plan. But you,” Ab growled, “had to go an’ almost muck it all up!”

Harry looked at the old man, shocked.

“Damn it all, boy, you shamed the hell out of the Wizengamot and then dared ‘em to give you the Kiss of all things!”

Well what the hell was I supposed to do? I get that you had a great plan and all, but no one told me about it! Those were the same people who let Sirius rot in Azkaban! I – I couldn’t let myself go there, can’t you see?” Harry gulped in a deep breath. He was just so tired. “Besides, I’ve already been Kissed once, and the Dementor in the STIFF didn’t even affect me! I just – I just figured it was better than a living death in Azkaban. And I thought I might get a chance to talk to you and Pel before the Kiss and see if there was a way I could tell them I have magic without … without talking about all the rest.”
Ab sighed. “No, I get your reasons, and they ain’t bad ones. Scared the hell out of me, though, an’ Pel.” He chuckled a little. “You should’a seen those bastards – all their crowing and hand-wringing! Though you do owe a case a’ something nice to Griselda Marchbanks. Withered little minx gave ‘em quite the kick in the arse on your behalf – she’s one of the ones that voted for your acquittal.”

Harry nodded and smiled.

“And in the end, that move probably helped more than I can say. Far as I know, no one’s ever had the stones to ask for the Kiss before. Shock and shame can go a long way when you’re dealin’ with decent-hearted bastards.”

Ab stood up and dusted the hay off his robes. “’S’more to tell you, but that’s the gist of it. Get yourself washed and cleaned up, then come down and have somethin’ to eat, got that lad?”

“Yeah, thanks Ab … Wait!” Harry pursed his lips. “There was a Potter there, yeah?”

Ab nodded, his face blank. “Fleamont Potter. James Potter’s father.”

*My grandfather.* “Did he – he didn’t vote for my acquittal, did he?”

“No, lad. He didn’t,” Ab’s voice was quiet. “But he was one of the first to come ‘round to Albus’ proposal.” Harry nodded silently. “You all right with that, Harry?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I expect so.” He gave Ab a faint smile. “It’s good to be home.”

Harry luxuriated in the shower for nearly twenty minutes, scrubbing the grime he’d accumulated in the STIFF off every plane and crevice of his body. Another twenty minutes later – Goat had been most insistent that he give her the amount of attention she was due – and he was entering the public room of the Head.

He grinned as he stood in the doorway. Several of the other regulars had arrived – Nappy Clank, Martial Sorner, Dung Fletcher and a few others – and were lounging around the bar and nearby tables. Dalcop Shicker was eyeing a plate of heaping sandwiches with longing, but Pel slapped his hand away. “You spend two weeks in prison and then *you’ll* get sandwiches!” Ab grunted a half-laugh and placed a dusty bottle of butterbeer next to the plate in front of the empty stool. Catching sight of Harry, the old man waved him over. “Eat. You like crap.”

The sandwiches seemed to melt in his mouth as he tucked in with gusto. “Oh God,” he moaned, “real food is so good.” Dalcop made for a sandwich on the far end of the plate again, but Harry quickly stabbed his butter knife down between the man’s fingers. “Not happening. *Mine.*”

“Aw, don’t be like tha’ Harry!” Dalcop whined. “You’ve always bin the nice one here!”

“Prison changes a man, Shicker,” Harry deadpanned. A beat later and the barflies were snorting beer through their nostrils.
“Nicely done, kid,” Nappy approved, wiping his nose.

The next hour was spent in pleasant, distracting conversation. Indeed, all the barflies seemed intent on making sure that Harry didn’t think too many long thoughts about the turn his life had taken. Nappy and Dung regaled them all with stories about their many brief stints as guests of the Ministry holding cells – the two just couldn’t not try to steal anything that wasn’t nailed down. Martial waxed long about a wizard he’d known by the unlikely name of Aphid Beeblebrox who’d gone on a five-day bender filled with unlikely adventures after he’d gotten out of a prison term for trying to rig a Quidditch World Cup.

“So, how’d ye occupy yerself in the nick, lad?” Dung wheezed at one point.

Harry laughed. “ Mostly by whinging to myself about how my life sucks.” He pulled on his butterbeer. “At one point I spent some time imagining what sort of cool prison tattoos I would get if they sent me to Azkaban.”

Pel giggled – he’d been celebrating his first legal foray in years a little too hard – “Decide on any, my friend?”

Harry shook his head. “Lots of black involved. Some fangs here and there . . . though I did think of getting one of my old owl Hedwig.” He smiled reminiscently. “She’s beautiful – a snowy.”

The regulars roared with laughter. “A snowy white owl prison tattoo . . . !,” Pel gasped out.

“Yer really not meant for prison, are ya, Harry?” Dalcop finished.

“Oi! I almost forgot!” Harry grinned suddenly. “Any of you know a limerick about a horny bloke from Mudchute?”

For the next half hour the group brainstormed possible endings for the unfinished ditty that had so tormented him during his stay in the STIFF. Harry learned all sorts of colorful and exciting terms for various parts of the human anatomy and interesting things that could be done to and with said anatomy, but the crew of the Head ultimately had to concede defeat. Eventually most of the regulars moved to a table to play a wizarding version of poker called Bragg, leaving Harry, Pel, and Ab at the bar.

“Hey, Pel,” Harry said suddenly into the companionable silence, “you said in court that it was that inspector woman who did something to the protection charms on the Head?”

Ab’s face grew thunderous. “Aye, Hornby, Olive Hornby. Bitch set up the inspection, we think, just so she could plant a wardreader.” At Harry’s puzzled look, he explained. “Little enchanted box that slowly gathers all the information on the charms and other wards affecting whatever place it’s in. S’how Macnair and those shits slipped right through the night protections on the Head – they knew everything they needed to know about the particulars. Don’t worry about it now, though, we put up all new charms to ward the place while you were gone.”

“Wardreaders are extremely regulated, Harry,” Pel added, “rigorously so. Only to be used with the Head of the DMLE’s authorization. Apparently Hornby managed to steal one from the properties room and put it in a cupboard in the kitchen on her last visit here. Everything up to that was just to get her inside.”
Harry shook his head in disbelief. “So that – that woman, the well-dressed snotty one, is a Death Eater? Seriously?”

Ab gave a snort of a laugh. “No, my friend,” Pel continued. “They checked her arm – it was clean.”

“Then why would she work with Macnair of all people?” This just doesn’t make any sense.

“She wouldn’t,” Ab put in bluntly. “We couldn’t find any connection between the two of them, or between her and either Folteren or Unsonsy.” Harry obviously still didn’t get it. “Think, lad! We know both Hornby and the three Death Eaters were involved, but didn’t know each other. What’s missing?”

Oh. “There’s someone else involved – someone who connects to all of them.”

“Aye,” Ab agreed. “A middleman. Trouble is, we got no evidence of who that might be. So we know that there’s at least one person still out there who doesn’t have warm an’ fuzzy feelings for you or us.”

“And,” Pel added, “because of Hornby’s contacts in the Ministry, they deigned not to subject her to truth potions. She’s not talking, even though they’re sending her to Azkaban.”

“Well shite,” Harry breathed, then checked to make sure no one else was listening in and quirked a smile. “Maybe we should check out whoever’s teaching Defense at Hogwarts this year.” The men looked at him, confused. “Well, they’ve always been the ones trying to kill me before, haven’t they?”

This earned quiet chuckles, but the three sobered quickly enough. “Albus is looking into it,” Ab said quietly. “I’ll let you know he finds anythin’ out, but we may have to wait for this middleman to expose himself.” He stood up. “Any rate, pub’ll start getting busy soon. I’m off to finish the stew – you get the night off, boy, but I expect your arse to be making up for the last few weeks startin’ tomorrow.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks Ab, you got it.”

As Ab lumbered off, he turned back to Pel. “I’m sorry, I just realized I haven’t had a chance to really ask you if you were okay after … what they did to you.”

Pel lowered his head. “I’m fine, but thanks for asking. It was one of the more unpleasant days in my life.”

“Do you – d’you know why they took you? I heard the Folteren man asking you about devices or passwords or something before I came in.”

The wayward solicitor sighed. “Not really something to talk with children about –,” he waved away Harry’s indignant protest, “but, as you’re already involved, and I’ve you to thank for escaping the bastard … I take it you know that I was the primary target, yes? That they only took you because of Macnair’s grudge?” Harry nodded. “Yeah, it’s one of the reasons they target me here rather than my place. Figured they could get me easy enough at the end of a night at the pub. Anyhow, they wanted me because of my past, when I worked for the Department of Mysteries. You know I used to be a barrister for them? Well, they got it into their heads that I’d have memories of … sensitive information.”
He gave Harry a calculating glance. “They wanted to know how to go about getting a hold of a lot of different artifacts in the DOM’s collections, a lot of it dangerous. Things like experimental wardreaders, time-turners, some stuff I’ve never even heard of, and a bunch of mythical crap that exists, I think, only in popular imagination, like Realigners.” At Harry’s blank look he continued, “A rumored joint project between the astronomers and prophets in the DOM. Big ‘exposé’ came out about in the Prophet some years back. Supposed to affect the alignment of cosmic forces to change fate or some such idiocy. Not surprising morons like Macnair and Unsonsy seemed to think they could just get a password and pocket them.” He snorted. “Anyway, we’re guessing that the Death Eaters kidnapped me to find out how to get these things … But we need to be worried about this. Really worried. It’s terrifying to think of what the man could do even with just a single time-turner.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed.

“They could have tortured me all they wanted, of course, I don’t know anything that could help him get them, after all.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “But they weren’t doing it on Voldemort’s orders, though.”

Pel wheeled around. “What?!” He grabbed Harry’s shirt. “No, don’t say anything. To the stable—now!”

The old barfly ushered him quickly out of the pub and down to the stables.

“Christ, Pel, what is it?” Harry exploded when the door was shut securely behind them.

“Why do think he wasn’t involved? Explain!”

*What the hell is going on with him?* Harry shrugged off his confusion and recounted his last conversation with Macnair, how he had pushed him to fury, disclosed Ab’s relationship to Dumbledore, and his eventual discovery that Pel and Harry’s kidnapping hadn’t been sanctioned by Voldemort.

Pel took it all in thoughtfully. “All right,” he said when Harry was done, “Voldemort didn’t authorize what happened to us, that seems clear enough, but it doesn’t mean he’s not still trying to get the DOM goodies, whether it’s something specific or he’s just hoping to get something useful. These Death Eaters might have just taken the initiative to get information he wanted and hoped to get themselves a nice reward.” *Makes sense*, Harry thought. “Still, though, I’m glad you told me. I’ll pass this information on to Ab, who can pass it on.”

*Pass it on to whom?* Harry wondered, *Probably Dumbledore again, like with the Hayle Massacre … Ab, what exactly are you up to with your brother?*

“So Ab,” Dung Fletcher slurred out much later that night, long after an exhausted Harry had been sent off to the stable, “Yer a paren’ now, are ye?”

The barflies laughed drunkenly into their cups.

“Custodian, you dumb fuck,” Ab responded idly as he glared down a young werewolf who seemed moments away from attacking Panty Wacco, the lascivious Welsh vampire. *That biter won’t ever learn that it can’t grope everyone without earning itself a few broken bones. And shit, the wolf just*
called Panty a ‘fag.’ Hope the furniture survives …

“Bah, whatever ya wanna call it, Ab,” came the voice of Dalcop from somewhere near the floor of the pub. “Yer a daddy now!”

Ab kept drew his wand and kept his eyes on the brewing barfight. “Stuff it, ya gob. You’re lucky you’re already on the floor.”

Dung smirked. “I fink iz gonna make him soft, yeah? Hey Ab! How ye fink yer doin’ so far as a paren’?”

Aberforth did not respond, as he was currently stunning a horny vampire and attempting to throw an apparently homophobic werewolf out of the pub. A stray spell shattered one of the windows while some of the defter patrons helped themselves to the remainders of the two fighters’ drinks.

When Ab finally returned to the bar he had a cut lip and disheveled robes. “How ‘m I doin’ as a parent?” He feigned contemplation. “Well, ’s only been two weeks now, but in that time my charge has been arrested for murder, tried by the ‘Gamot, told the lot of ‘em to fuck off, got convicted of murder, signed himself up to lose his soul, and somehow still got home in time for dinner today.”

He flashed the regulars a feral grin.

“I think I’m gettin’ the hang of it.”

This time Ab joined in when the boys roared with laughter.

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16 April, 1977

Harry woke up the next morning just as a pale dawn was beginning to color the night with blue and lavender. It took him a few moments of confused blinking to figure out what was wrong – why am I so comfortable? – before he remembered that he was no longer in the contraption the STIFF insisted was a bed.

A thought suddenly lanced across his mind and woke him completely.

I killed three people. Macnair, Folteren, and Unsonsy were alive. And then I killed them, and they weren’t anymore.

With the chaotic aftermath of the kidnapping and the long nights filled with anxiety in the STIFF, he hadn’t given himself a chance to consider the events that led to his incarceration themselves. It seemed his brain had decided that now was the time, whether he liked it or not.

Gingerly exploring his emotions, he frowned in disbelief. He thought … he thought he should feel overcome with guilt, with remorse, especially for Folteren. In Macnair’s case he was desperate and barely thinking, while with Unsonsy he wasn’t even sure if what he would do would work. But Folteren …

He had slit Folteren’s throat without a second thought. Some people can just do with a good killin’ Pel, he had said. He had meant it then.
What does this mean?

What does this make me?

It makes you a person who’ll do what has to be done, even if it ain’t pretty, that clear male voice he’d heard in his head at Macnair’s spoke up. Some might call you a murderer for it, but it’s the same reason that Pel’s around to call you his savior.

Harry blinked when he realized he felt no guilt, then again when he realized he felt no guilt about his lack of self-loathing. The guilt just … wasn’t there.

He found himself thinking instead about the last few months spent with Tweeny Twig’s Guide. He’d been so excited to try and figure out creative ways to use old spells, and ways to turn common ones into unexpected offensive moves. It had been … it had been really fun. But looking back, he thought himself terribly naive. Now that he’d intentionally killed people, that excitement seemed juvenile and even a little obscene.

I can kill people when I need to and be okay. That’s good. But I have to remember that it isn’t fun, it isn’t something to get excited about. This is … something to do because I have to, or because it’s right, but it’s also something to regret had to happen.

His mouth curled into a slow smile, an intimate expression of surprise that wasn’t for the rest of the world, only himself. What I did might not have been the good thing to do. It might not have been the heroic thing to do, even. But it was the right thing. And I can live with that.

Still smiling and bemused at the unexpected turns his life had taken, he padded out the door to the back garden.

I’m free and I’m alive.

He thought of the welcome he’d received when he returned to the Head, of Ab and Pel in the courtroom with him.

And I’m not alone anymore.

A bark attracted his attention.

Oh! I’m actually not alone anymore.

“Colin!”

The adolescent thestral had been carefully inspecting the area behind the Head’s shed but perked up immediately upon hearing Harry’s footsteps.

He pranced over and quivered in ecstasy when Harry hugged him and gave him some enthusiastic scratches down his bony flank. “Wow, Colin, I think you’re almost taller than me now! It’s so great to see you – I’ve missed you this winter.” Colin gave his odd barking purr. “Oh, and I have to go and see your mum later! Ab told me that she helped him find me. I’m going to get some meat from the kitchen – don’t tell Ab! – and take it to her.” At the word ‘meat’ Colin looked around in excitement, then settled back, content with scratches for the time being.

The calming, repetitive motion of scratching the thestral brought to mind nights that seemed almost
like they belonged to another person’s life, when he was snug in the Gryffindor common room, petting Crookshanks and talking about whatever with Ron and Hermione. He cringed a bit when he realized he hadn’t thought about them in a while, though in fairness he’d had a lot on his mind.

“I wish I could see them, Colin. I have so much to tell them … Can you imagine Hermione’s face when she finds out about how squibs are treated? She was a machine when it came to the house elves – this would be so much worse! And Ron would love to hear about all the dodgy stuff I’ve learned working at the Head…”

As the spring sun rose over Hogsmeade, Harry reminisced with Colin about friends long lost but not yet born, missing them desperately but strangely happy nonetheless.

The next several hours were spent working on all his regular chores. He’d never enjoyed mucking out the stable quite so much before.

In the late morning Ab plodded down for breakfast, still exhausted from his early morning for court the day before and his late night working the bar. Harry wordlessly slipped him a plate piled high with an English breakfast.

“Aurors’ll probably be by later today or tomorrow,” he grunted as he wiped his mouth clean.

“What!” Harry immediately flew into a panic, expecting to be dragged back to the DMLE at any moment.

“Ah, calm yourself boy! Don’t you remember? S’a condition of your parole to meet with ‘em regularly. They’re comin’ soon for the first meetin’ and to set up a schedule.”

Harry blushed. “Oh. Well that’s okay then.”

“They’ll probably also inform you about where you’ll do your ‘service to wizards’ bollocks.”

*I had conveniently forgotten about that. Dammit.*

He sighed. “Any idea where I’ll have to go to learn ‘proper respect for my betters’? Please tell me it won’t be the Ministry. I’d die happy never having to go *there* again.”

Ab chortled. “Don’t be stupid, lad. Remember who’s behind this deal of yours, after all.”

The younger wizard’s eyes grew suspicious, then gradually widened. “You’re not saying that I have to work at –”

“Aye, that’s exactly what I’m sayin’.” Sarcasm dripped from Ab’s every word. “What better place for a young squib to learn he ain’t worth shit than the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world?”

Harry stared at the old bartender in horror.

“Oh bloody *fuck,*” he breathed. “I have to go to Hogwarts.”
This concludes Arc I.

Chapter End Notes

* This is the end of Arc 1 of The Second String, which I admit I’ve secretly been calling Harry Potter and the…Fuck Yeah, I’m a Time-Traveling Squib Ya’ll!
A quick reminder for Arc 2: Please remember that Harry went back in time the summer after his fourth year. This means he lacks a ton of critical knowledge about the past that he gained especially in OotP (e.g., about how the wizarding world reacted to the first war, about the Order, his mum and dad’s relationship, specifics about Snape’s relationship with the Marauders, Snape’s fifth-year argument with Lily – remember, they’re all finishing their sixth year now --, Sirius’ home life and so on.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XII. The Devil Reversed

22 April, 1977

“You cannot be serious.”

“Aye, I am, an’ you’ll do it.”

“Oh, c’mon! No! Why?”

Ab rounded on an indignant Harry. “Why? Why? I don’t know, _because you’re a wizard_, that’s why!”

Harry sputtered. “But, but, but what about the whole ‘people can’t know I do magic’ thing?”

“Don’t be thick, boy,” Ab grumbled. _Merlin, teenagers_. “We want the Ministry and wizarding Britain in general to think you’re a squib, sure, but there’s a much bigger world out there that don’t give two shits _what_ you are. You’re a wizard, an’ from what I’ve seen you’ve got some talent, which I don’t aim to have you squander. ‘Sides, if they ever do find out you’re what you are, you’d have to do it anyway. This takes care of all that.” The boy still looked defiant and Ab glared. “Don’t make me say ‘you’ll do it ‘cause I said so’.”

Harry dug into the bar with toe of his boots. “You know, the _one_ good thing about all this was that I at least didn’t have to take _tests_.” His lower lip threatened a pout. “I don’t _wanna_ take my O.W.L.s!”

Ab stared flatly at him. “That’s some expert whining’ you’re doin’ there, lad.”

Harry had the grace to flush a bit. “Fine, fine. Have it your way,” he surrendered. “I’ll start studying and I’ll take the bloody O.W.L.s. When and where will I be doing this, anyway?”

“I’m thinkin’ this winter. We can have you do it in Belgium – they offer the test in English for home-schooled kids there.”
Harry sighed. “I don’t even really know what’s on them, though! Hermione always took care of that stuff.”

“Bah, there’s study guides we can get easy enough. I can help you with Defense and Potions – they were always my best – an’ you’ll surely be spendin’ time helpin’ Hagrid at the school for your parole, he can teach you Creatures far better than the moron Kettleburn could, and he don’t even need to know anythin’ about you havin’ magic. You’ll also probably have to work the greenhouses in the summer, so pay attention. Pel’ll probably be fine with helping you with History of Magic, though he’ll be useless for anythin’ else. You don’t even need to study of Muggle Studies. You do Runes or Arithmancy?”

Harry shook his head. “Divination.”

Ab snorted. “Well, if we need to, I bet ol’Wigol will help. Hell, crazy fuck probably knows half your story already anyway, and even if he were to say something’, no one would understand him.”

Rows of crystal balls and predictions about Muggle soap operas came to Harry’s mind. I was right – Wigol does do Divination or something.

Ab looked thoughtful. “Well, that leaves Astronomy, Charms, and Transfiguration. Screw the stars, no one cares about an Astronomy O.W.L. As for the others, wanded courses are the most important. I know you can do Charms on your own – all that wandless shit and those little rocks of yours prove that well enough. I can help too. Transfiguration … well, you don’t have to be great, you just gotta pass.”

When Ab put it like that, there just seemed so much to do. “But Ab, when am I going to do all this? Between working here and having to do that service bollocks, how will I find time to study?”

“You’re my charge, boy. That includes seein’ to your education. Head ran just fine before you got here, she’ll sure run fine if you’re makin’ potions rather than washin’ dishes. We’ll work it out.”

Ab pushed back his cleaned breakfast plate, stood and grabbed his cloak. “As for now, I’m curious what you can do with a wand. We’re goin’ to your cave, and then the Forest.”

This had Harry grinning with excitement. It felt like it had been forever since he’d done any proper magic, and his hand already itched to hold familiar holly and phoenix feather.

Teenagers, Ab lamented.

An hour later saw an unlikely quartet standing in a glade not far from Harry’s original practice grounds (before they were rendered unusable by the fallen giant tree). Ab shook his head in disgust as Colin pranced around, shaking his thickening main of black hair exuberantly. Goat, who had just shown up without preamble as they were walking from the cave, ignored them all and began scarfin’ down some wild marjoram.

“All right, lad. Let’s start with you showin’ me your best defensive spell.”

Harry bit his lip. He knew several shields, and there was always Expelliarmus but … He brandished his wand and thought – felt – hard for a happy thought.
Christmas at the Head. People no one else wanted, people like me, having a place. Gifts from Hagrid and Ab. The war of the chessmen on Dalcolp and Pel. Hot chocolate that someone who cares made for me.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Silver-white mist surged from his wand and coalesced into the shining form of …

Of not Prongs.

He gaped as the massive glowing bird gave a single wingbeat and then glided effortlessly through the glade before alighting on a nearby tree branch and sending Harry a questioning look.

“Oh, um, hello,” Harry stuttered in shock. “I was just – don’t worry, there aren’t any Dementors or anything here.” The bird slowly shimmered away.

Ab raised an eyebrow. “Damn fine patronus you got there.”

“But, that’s not my patronus!” Harry exclaimed. “Mine’s a stag – it’s always a stag!”

“Don’t you know shit about the spell you can do, boy?” Ab barreled on without waiting for a reply. “You think of happy memories to do it, yeah? Well, did you think of the same happy memory this time as you used to? Did it involve the same people, the same sort of happiness?”

Oh. I guess … no, it didn’t. Different people, different place, and the happiness was different too. It … it wasn’t about wanting something, like it is when I think of Mum and Dad or Sirius. It was more about already having something.

Ab was watching him closely. “I can tell by your face it wasn’t. See, the memory not only powers the patronus, it determines it, what it looks like. Person practices enough, they can make a bunch a’ different patroni, dependin’ on how many different types of happy memories they can use.” He leaned against a tree thoughtfully. “I’m sure you could still make your stag, just have to think a’ the things that make him real for you. I know my brother can make at least five different ones, though the bastard always uses his phoenix when others are gonna see it. Flashy git.”

Harry hid his grin. Hearing Ab insult the headmaster was always funny, and he was deeply relieved that he hadn’t lost Prongs forever despite his rather unfavorable opinion of his teenaged father. “So what do you think this new patronus was? All I could tell what that it’s a big bird.”

Ab shrugged and had Harry cast it again.

Whatever it is, it’s huge. Hell, it’s wingspan’s almost as big as Buckbeak’s!

“Albatross, s’gotta be, bird that big,” Ab pronounced as the bird slowly faded away, “Definitely one of the giant types … maybe a Wandering Albatross, if I had to guess.”

A faint memory of his muggle schooling flitted across Harry’s mind. “An albatross? Aren’t they bad luck or something?”

The old man sighed. “What the hell are they teaching you, boy? No, in fact, most sailors think ‘em rare signs of great fortune if left alone to their business. They’ll fly on to wherever they’re headed through any type a’ storm, so they say, no matter how dangerous. Every so often one’ll follow along
with a ship on a long journey – most believe it a sin to kill one, no matter how hungry a crew may be.” Harry missed the searching look Ab sent him.

“Oh. Well that’s good then,” Harry finished lamely.

Ab ran Harry through all the shields he had learned, nodding in general approval but barking out a number of unknown spells that he wanted Harry to look up and master.

“Now! Let’s talk offensive spells. I hope you got somethin’ that packs more of a punch than that stupid Expelliarmus you said you used against that Dark Lord bastard. Show me your best, an’ I don’t want to hear Reducto. Already know you’ve got that one covered.”

Harry grinned internally. He knew just the spell to show Ab.

“But … but … but that’s a fucking bread-slicing spell!” Ab gasped, dumbfounded, staring at the newly-fallen tree.

“Yep.”

“A bread-slicing spell!”

“Mmm-hmm.” Harry wasn’t really one for sounding smug, but when he did, he pulled it off brilliantly.

Ab nearly snarled in frustration. “Explain.”

Harry smiled. “I just have to really believe that the target is bread, and it works. If I don’t, nothing happens.”

“You just believe it’s bread? That’s it?!! But … that’s not how it works.” The man suddenly looked a little lost. “Don’t think that’s how it works, at least …” Aberforth paused for a long moment and then licked his lips. “You got more?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry’s grin got larger as he pulled out his battered copy of Tweeny Twig’s Guide for Young Domestics. “Want to see what happens when you really believe a tree is a carrot and cast a peeling spell on it? Ever think about what would happen if you cast Scourgify at someone – not thinking about their mouths, like parents do for kids that use profanity – but thinking about their eyes or even their brains? Or what happens if you cast a refilling spell at a person’s stomach so that it fills them with their own blood to the point that it surges up their digestive track and chokes them?”

Ab stared as Harry continued thoughtfully. “Difference between all these spells and the normal defense ones is simple. There’s shields for things like Expelliarmus and Reducto and Stupefy and, more importantly, people react with shields when they hear those spells. If a wizard hears a carrot-peeling spell … I’m not sure he’d think to throw up a Protego. Plus, do you actually think any of the rich, poncey, house-elf owning purebloods in Voldemort’s army actually know what most of these spells do? They’d be completely lost if they heard the incantations.” He smiled triumphantly. “And the best part? None of them are illegal or even Dark. Just simple, innocent, household spells.”

Ab continued to stare, a strange look in his eye. “You’ve not just been learnin’ to defend yourself, have you lad? You’re … you’re goin’ to war.”
Harry blinked. “Er – maybe … Yeah, I guess, though I still have to figure out a way to fight without messing up the future.” He sighed. “Still, the way I see it, war’s going to come for me, just like everyone else, whether I prepare for it or not. Just looked at what happened the other day!”

Four days after Harry’s trial ended, Voldemort had staged raids at the Muggleborn outreach offices in Cardiff, York, and Belfast. Luckily their wards had held, but a number of magical and non-magical people outside the buildings had lost their lives. From the reports in the *Prophet*, the DMLE was working like mad to contain the news and convince the muggles that the attacks were the products of disgruntled Irish revolutionaries.

He sighed and toed the dirt. “Look, Ab, I know I’ve been lucky so far against Voldemort and the Death Eaters. I … I don’t want to be just lucky anymore.”

The old man nodded slowly and gazed at the remains of the tree that Harry had used *Panemseco* on. “Bloody fuckin’ hell, lad.” He shook his head and spat. “You’re goin’ to war armed with household charms.” Ab slowly began making his way back to town, shaking his head and muttering darkly about Potters, teenagers, and insanity.

The two arrived at the Head not long after a scowling Quisby had opened for the afternoon. As could be expected on a weekday, the public room was nearly deserted, but for a group of four—including Wigol Palter—seated at a table drinking tea and apparently playing cards.

As Ab took off to do something or other, Harry grabbed a sandwich from the kitchen and set himself up at the bar to eat, smiling as he thought again about Ab’s shocked reaction to the bread-slicing charm. *I actually think I impressed him!*

“Oh, look at that smile! Yes, this is a kindly little Devil turned on his head, one who resists being the scapegoat and bowing to tradition, resists allowing the status quo to remain, yet still knows joy!” crooned an ancient, feminine voice.

A laugh of derision from another woman sounded. “True, but the Five of Wands awaits him – he won’t stay happy with such a lot for long, will he?”

Wigol murmured something that set the others to nodding and clucking.

“Oh dear,” the first voice gasped, “look at that – the Tower with an upright Six of Swords! Poor little Devil reversed, it can be so hard to have to grow up …”

*What are they on about?*

Brow furrowed, he turned and found the group at Wigol’s four-top peering at him. He’d seen them in the Head before a few times, three very wizened women and Wigol, but hadn’t really paid them much mind. Conversing with old ladies was not, he believed, his forte.

“Er-, sorry, were you talking about me?”

The woman whose seat was at the fore of the table and who’d spoken last favored Harry with a smile that was a bit too wide and had a bit too much teeth for his liking. She was old – ancient, really, her skin was white and papery, her hair, pulled back in a bun and covered with a fuchsia lace
doily, was nearly the same color. Too much plum-colored lipstick covered her lips and, he noticed, several of her teeth. Her burgundy dress belonged in the nineteenth century, a true gown complete with puffed sleeves and cameos. Really, she made Dumbledore seem young. But it was her eyes that unsettled him. Bright, dark purple eyes that flashed and peered at him with a disconcerting clarity.

“Ah, young man, you’ve caught us out! My apologies for any rudeness, dear.” Harry made to politely assure her that no offense was taken, but she was already speaking again. “I don’t believe we’ve met, my dear. I’m Moira Pemphredo. Professor Moira Pemphredo.” She held out her hand imperiously, fingers tilted downward as if she expected him to kiss it. Harry walked over and shook it instead, much to one of her companion’s amusement.

Before he could introduce himself, she was again speaking. “I am, of course, a professor at Hogwarts, as I’m sure you knew.”

Harry blinked. “Ah, well it’s nice to meet you, ma’am. What do you teach there?”

The other two women snickered as Professor Pemphredo’s smile faltered slightly. “Why, Divination, my dear, the Art of Seeing and Knowing.”

“Oh. Er – that’s nice.” She narrowed her eyes. “I mean, it sounds really cool,” Harry tried again. She must be Trelawney’s predecessor … Why are Divination teachers all so – so – so much like every word they say should be capitalized? “So, I’ve seen you all in here before, playing cards and other stuff.”

The three women seemed scandalized, but Wigol flashed him a toothless grin.

“Boy, we are hardly ‘playing cards’!” Gasped one of the other women. “We are unlocking the Fates, charting the Unseen Lines that guide the Universe, casting ourselves into –”

“They’re gambling,” Quisby interrupted with a smirk.

The women huffed up indignantly while Wigol laughed.

“I – I don’t understand.”

Quisby snorted and answered before any of the women could. “There’s a surprise, squib. Anyway, they come in a couple times a month and make predictions and bet on the outcomes. Next meeting they see whose came out best, argue like old cats for awhile, and then divvy up the winnings. It’s not just tarot cards and tea leaves, neither. Oh no, they’ll bet on anything.”

Wigol happily held up the notebook Harry had seen him writing in when they had watched the telly together. “Crnatshunshret!

Harry squinted and tried to puzzle that one out. “Wait – did you say Coronation Street, Wigol?” The man nodded. “Are you telling me you … do what? … divination gambling on a muggle soap opera?”

Quisby laughed. “Yeah, heard ol’ Wig here took them for more’n a hundred galleons last year on that muggle shit alone!”

_Wizards are just so weird sometimes._

Professor Pemphredo sniffed in disdain. “Yes, well, not hard to see why you couldn’t pass your
Divination O.W.L., is it Mr. Rakefire? At any rate,” she rose and creaked over to Harry, putting a boney arm around his shoulders, “you, my little upturned Devil, have quite the interesting spread already! Why don’t you come over and we can try to See more about you?”

Wigol giggled.

“So, you’re uh, all Seers?” Harry had long since come to agree with Hermione that Divination was a very wooly discipline, but he most certainly did not need prophetic busybodies taking an interest in him. *If they can See even a little, I’m humped.*

“Of course!” simpered the third crone, the only one who hadn’t spoken yet. She peered at him from under a black lace Victorian mourning veil that matched the somber black taffeta her frail body was swathed in.

Pemphredo sent her an indulgent smile before muttering to Harry “Well, all but dear Cassiopeia … one of the many misguided interlopers, I’m afraid but, well,” she cackled quietly “her money’s good.”

“Oh,” Harry choked out. *I really don’t want to be a part of this conversation anymore.* “That’s … really nice. It was great to meet you all, but I, uh, have to get back to work in the kitchen now!”

“No you don’t,” Quisby, *that traitorous git*, piped up, grinning broadly.

“Yes! Yeah I do. Ab said so. So, uh, I’m sure I’ll see you ladies again. Have a pleasant time … doing all that. Later Wig!” He left the pub at a near run, headed up the back staircase, and only stopped when he reached the Yellow Room, hoping to have a more rewarding conversation with Ariana.

An hour later, Harry was gratefully rescued by Ab. His conversation with Ariana had not been as enjoyable as he’d expected. Apparently the poor girl had wandered into the cityscape that hung in the Red Room the night before and had found Yarda Gobermouch ‘entertaining’ a client, to her horrified fascination. Harry was thus unexpectedly thrust into the uncomfortable position of explaining sex to the scandalized young portrait. He was fairly sure that he’d done a rubbish job of it, and suspected that it would take weeks for Ariana to stop blushing and casting appalled little looks at his pelvis. The diagrams had definitely been a mistake. *Now I get why Ab didn’t have any paintings in the guest rooms. And if she mentions any of this to him, I won’t see sunlight for months.*

His relief at Ab’s sudden presence, however, abruptly disappeared. “Aurors are downstairs for you,” was all he said.

*Shite.*

Harry had been expecting them, of course, but the single day he had thought he’d have to wait for them turned into two, then three, then a week. He’d been quietly hoping that the Ministry would just forget about his parole meetings. *No such luck.*

He noted with some relief as he entered the public room that at least the gambling seers were gone but for Wigol. His relief only increased when one of the two red-robed Aurors near the door turned around and flashed him a familiar friendly smile.
“Alice!” he beamed. “I mean, uh, Auror Fawley! Are you my – I didn’t expect you.”

The young Auror’s smile broadened “Harry, it’s great to see you without bars between us! Yep, you are looking at the official Auror overseer of your parole!”

At this her hulking companion turned around. “Goyle?!” Harry couldn’t help but yelp. Oh shit, I didn’t just say my nickname for him out loud. Please tell me I didn’t.

Auror ‘Goyle,’ whom Harry remembered well from his trial, frowned. “Mr. Harry, I didn’t think I’d told you my name before,” he remarked in confusion.

There was a beat before Harry’s mind caught up with that comment. Seriously? He really is a Goyle? I – I thought that they would all be Death Eaters or something, but at the trial he seemed … pretty decent actually.

“Lucky guess, I suppose,” he choked out, trying to smile.

“Well, anyway, Goyle and I are going to be in charge of you. Honestly I shouldn’t even be here as a trainee, but, well, no one else was really interested in taking your case, so they let me. I’ll be your main contact. Goyle’s just on to make sure I don’t arse up the paperwork.” She gave him an apologetic look, as if Harry would have preferred a real auror. He snorted internally. “Sorry it took so long for this visit, but I expect you know about the attacks … Things have been pretty busy. Plus now with what happened to the Hogwarts professor!”

Harry’s ears perked up at that. “What are you talking about?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Figured you’d have heard. Apparently the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Statim Moriens, managed to off himself while trying to show his NEWT students how to do some counter-curse the other day. They’re pretty sure it was just an accident, but Aurors are investigating just in case it was something more sinister.”

Goyle cleared his throat meaningfully. “Sorry to interrupt, but this isn’t a social call. Fawley, you take care of making sure he understands the realities here. I’ll arrange for his service to wizards with his custodian. Be back at HQ in an hour.” With that he waved a glaring Ab over to a table in the back and began pulling out parchment.

Discreetly rolling her eyes at her companion, Alice linked her arm in Harry’s. “Let’s go out and do this. I haven’t really had any time to visit the village since I graduated!”

Harry grinned as they strolled around the corner and then down High Street, with Alice chirping on about her various adventures in the village as a student. She seemed entirely unconcerned with the occasional glares sent her way for acting so pleasantly around Harry.

Indeed, Harry had only been out in the village once since his trial and had been met with an even more chilly reception than he was used to receiving. Witches and wizards crossed the street when they spied him or watched him from windows, wands in hand and eyes furious. Only one had dared to speak to him, an ancient old woman who hissed “Wizard-killer” as he passed her. A few, however, had seemed more speculative than angry. When he had passed the ‘Sticks, for example, Rosie had given him a strange sort of half smile.

Alice prattled on, immune to it all.
The two spent some time looking in the windows of Honeyduke’s and Zonko’s, though moved off from the latter fairly quickly. An old man in rags was sitting against the storefront, begging for spare coins and muttering darkly to himself in wheezing voice. Although Alice gave him a few knuts and a sickle, he hissed wordlessly at the pair of them.

“Sad that,” the young auror observed as they hastened on their way.

“Yeah, you don’t really seem homeless people or beggars in Hogsmeade,” agreed Harry, thinking back to the disappointment he had felt last August when he realized the village would offer little in the way of dumpster-diving.

Alice sighed. “With the way the war is going, we’ll probably only see more folks down on their luck, especially squibs and muggleborn.”

At one point they bumped into Celeste, the perfectly coiffed shop-girl from Gladrags. His eyes widened as the cold and abrupt young woman broke into a smile at seeing Alice and proceeded to spend several minutes talking excitedly with her. Apparently they had been dormmates in Hufflepuff. When she finally took the time to notice Harry, the shop girl gave Alice a strange look, but she was polite enough, compared to most of the other villagers at least.

“Your clothes are an improvement on last time,” Celeste archly observed.

Harry laughed. “Yeah, thanks for recommending that place to me.”

The girl looked uncomfortable and seemed to search for something else to say. “You … you look different – better – without your glasses.”

“Thanks!” Harry grinned.

“You wore glasses?” Alice cut in.

He grimaced. “Yeah, they were broken in the … well, with everything that happened. After I came home Ab got me this brilliant potion that keeps my vision perfect. I have to take it every five years or so and it tastes like goblin piss, but it’s definitely worth it!” And I look even less like James Potter, so there’s less of a chance of discovery.

Both young women gaped at him. “But, but Harry the *Oculi Corrigendi* potion is really expensive! Your custodian actually got it for you? Wow!”

Harry’s eyebrows raised, but a warm feeling settled in his stomach. “Yeah, yeah he did. I didn’t know it cost so much …” He had to concentrate to keep a silly smile from his face.

Celeste eventually departed with many promises to Alice to meet for drinks in the future. *Somehow I don’t see a girl like that having those drinks in the Head.*

The pair soon passed the monstrously pink storefront of Madame Puddifoot’s Tea Shop, and Alice pulled him to the door. “I haven’t been to Puddy’s in forever! Let’s do the official tripe here. They have the best biscuits in Hogsmeade!”

Harry followed her in with obvious reluctance. He’d never been inside, now or in the future, but felt that no biscuit could be worth subjecting oneself to this many bows, cherubs, and lacy pink frills.
A very stout woman in her early thirties with black hair that cascaded out of a bun in perfect ringlets bustled over to them, all sweet smiles and bright eyes. “Miss Fawley, my dear girl, how marvelous to see you!” She talks like she’s sixty, not thirty. “And who is your frie – Oh.” As soon as she caught sight of Harry standing awkwardly behind Alice, her smile evaporated. A glance at Alice had her clearing her throat overly delicately. “Auror Fawley, dear, while I always appreciate your custom and think it lovely to see you, I’m afraid that I can’t allow my establishment to be used by the Aurors for, ah, official purposes.”

Alice looked a bit confused, but grinned. “Oh, not to worry Madame Puddifoot. Harry and I are just here to go over a few details and enjoy some of the best tea and biscuits in Britain!”

“Yes, well,” the older woman’s hands twisted nervously in her apron, torturing the fragile pink lace that edged the garment. “I’m afraid, Aurora Fawley, that some elements are simply not welcome here, whatever the reason and whomever their company.” She tittered. “You do understand of course, my dear. Why, I have a reputation to uphold!”

The handful of other customers in the shop – all women, whose median age seemed at least seventy – watched the goings on shamelessly.

Indignant confusion marred Alice’s typically open and friendly face. “I don’t – are you saying you won’t let Harry in here? Seriously? Why – ?”

“Auror Fawley!” Puddifoot herself seemed shocked at the sharpness of her own tone and immediately adopted a more simpering approach. “Dear, this is my establishment after all. Please, do come back anytime yourself, of course.”

“This is – !”

“Alic – Aurora Fawley,” Harry interrupted. “Let’s go.” He looked around the fussy tea shop in disdain. “The air in here is rather rancid, after all.” He turned on his heel and strode out the door, not turning to see if Alice actually followed him.

She did, her round cheeks as red as her robes and her eyes flashing. “What the hell was that?!” she fumed as she followed Harry down a less populous avenue to a small park. “She wouldn’t even let you in!”

As they sat down on the benches Harry quirked a smile. “Well, I am a convicted murder meeting with his parole officer. I’m dangerous.”

The young Auror looked appropriately sheepish, remembering their first conversation, then frowned. “Oh. Well. I guess that is true.” Alice worried her lip for a few minutes while Harry watched the birds. “She seemed to know you. Have you been in there before?”

“Nope, this was my first time. Though most of the village knew of me a bit, I think, even before the Macnair business. I try to avoid most places, but sometimes Ab has me run errands to the ones that’ll let me in.”

Alice goggled. “Wait – you mean there’s other places that won’t sell to you just because you don’t have magic?”

His humorless laugh seemed to startle her. “Well, yeah, Alice. Most places won’t. That friend of yours – Celeste – she wouldn’t let me buy anything at Gladrags when I first came here, even though
I had plenty of gold. She wasn’t really horrible about it, said it was company policy, and even pointed me to Jinky’s Jumble. Other folks don’t even bother to be polite. That cobbler, Cordwaine, I think, he drew his wand and threatened me as soon as I entered his shop. Some are okay enough – like Rosmerta – but most … not so much. And this was all before Macnair.”

The Auror looked near tears when he finally glanced over at her.

“Alice? I mean, don’t you know this?”

He was concerned that she’d worried her lip so much it would start bleeding before she finally responded. “Yeah, no, I don’t know. When I was little I knew that being a squib meant that my family wouldn’t want me anymore, but I guess I never really thought about what it’s like to have to actually live as one. I thought … I thought people were, I don’t know, better or something.”

She looked down at her boots and toed the designer’s name stitched in gold on the side. “I bought these as a graduation present for myself a few years ago. From Cordwaine. He was really nice to me. And Celeste is probably the most Hufflepuffian Hufflepuff I know.”

Alice heaved a sigh and seemed to sink deeper into the bench. “I just don’t like seeing people I thought were good not being good, I guess. Makes me think of how they would have treated me if things were just a bit different … And I’m mad at myself for never noticing how people like you are treated, I guess.”

Harry wanted to say that, in his old life, he’d never bothered to think about how squibs were treated either. That doesn’t make me a bad person, he thought, what’s bad is when you do notice, but ignore it or go along with it. Instead, he smiled. “Look, Alice, there’s no reason to beat yourself up. You’ve been one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. I – I’m really glad I had you when I was in there. You made it better, so much better than it would have been. And the fact that you’re this angry on my behalf? Well, that’s great. It shows what sort of person you are.”

He paused thoughtfully. “As for the others, well, I know you can’t change people unless they decide to change. Celeste probably is a really nice person. But she’s not perfect. She’s not even mean, really. She’s just … ignorant about some things, I guess. Maybe seeing us being friends or whatever will help her change, I don’t know. Either way, I certainly can’t expect a warm welcome in the village anymore.” He widened his eyes into a mock-scary face. “I’m a deranged murdering squib, after all!”

Alice laughed a little, catching on to the fact that he was referring to the descriptions of him that had been in circulation prior to the trial. When he’d been released, Dalcop and Dung had taken great delight in quoting some of the more scathing Prophet articles. Even three years before I’m born I can’t escape bad press, Harry had thought wryly. Pel and Ab weren’t surprised when the final outcome of his trial was only reported in a small piece several pages in and below the fold, in an article that didn’t even mention Ab’s name. Apparently both the Ministry and the Dark Lord’s supporters considered his trial a public relations wash and were content to focus on more potentially productive avenues.

“Well, speaking of that, time to do the boring stuff.” She pulled out and resized a shrunken sheaf of parchment. “What all this is essentially stuff I’m supposed to read you about how wizards are amazing, squibs are lowly scum, and you’re lucky we let you remain part of our wonderful, magical world. Sign your initials at the bottom of the last page verifying that you have read or heard the contents of the packet and understand them, and then we’re done!”
Harry groaned and turned to the first page of the long, scrawling text to begin reading. *Ugh. Legal language.*

Alice’s mouth dropped open. “Wait, you’re not actually going to read it all, are you? We’ll be here forever!”

It was very long and tedious. *But the Goblet of Fire* … “Alice, I’m definitely going to read it all. It’d be stupid not to – you’re asking me sign some sort of contract thing without knowing the terms! No way am I going to accidentally get sucked into some magical contract with the Ministry – not after all that’s happened!”

“But – but, Harry, I swear it’s nothing. It’s just a bunch of crap and then you sign it to verify that you read and understand it!” she sputtered.

He sighed. “I do believe that you think that, but I won’t trust them. Get comfortable.”

She sat back in a huff, muttering about a date that night and stupidly long documents.

Reading it was as torturous as Harry expected it to be, even as Alice kept making puppy dog eyes at him, hoping he’d give it up. Statement after statement was full of words like “heretofore” and “aforementioned,” all essentially beating it in to him that squibs were worthless. By the time he finished, he was sure he couldn’t sign it.

“There you are!” a male voiced boomed into the park. Alice perked up immediately and turned to the newcomer with a broad smile. “Frank! What are you doing here?”

A tall, broad-shouldered young man with dark hair and Auror robes was striding over towards them. His serious face brightened when he looked at Alice. “Well, Goyle said you’d be back by five, but it’s just after six and we were supposed to meet…”

“Oh, damn, I didn’t realize I’d been gone that long! *Someone* just had to read the entire document I gave him before he’d sign it!” She rolled her eyes in Harry’s direction. “Harry, this is my boyfriend Frank. Frank, this is Harry, the kid I told you about.”

Frank eyed Harry sharply before he decided to stick out his hand. “No offense, but that’s Auror Longbottom to you.”

“Longbottom?!” Harry sputtered. He shook the man’s hand in a daze. *Auror Longbottom?*! *As in Neville? Neville Longbottom?* He supposed he could see the resemblance, though this man looked far more capable and confident than his former dormmate.

Suddenly the voice of Igor Karkaroff boomed in his mind. “… This man took part in the torture by use of the Cruciatus curse of the Auror Frank Longbottom and his wife!” *His wife. Frank … and Alice Longbottom. (*)*  

*Oh God.*

Alice’s friendly round face. Her infectious smile. He knew that smile, only he was used to seeing a far more rare and shy version of it.

*Oh God. They’re Neville’s parents. Alice is his mum. And … and they don’t really make it through the war.*
The air is in lungs felt wrong, and Harry wanted to cry, to scream. He really, really liked Auror Alice. But Frank was looking at him strangely. *This is not the place to lose it.*

“Yeah,” Frank said slowly. “Longbottom. You know the name?”

Harry forced himself to smile. “Actually I do.” *Breathe, for fuck’s sake.* “A long time ago I sort of met your mother really briefly, I think. Ah, big hat with a vulture on top, right?”

Frank’s suspicious face melted into a smile in return. “Oh, that *hat.* Yes, you’re thinking of Augusta Longbottom.”

“Well now that we’re all caught up,” Alice said, sounding a bit annoyed, “Harry, please initial the damn thing so that I can go on my date. *Please.*”

Harry’s face fell. “Look, Alice, I’m really sorry, but I can’t. The shit in here … Like this bit here basically says that ‘the person who signs this believes that every witch and wizard is better than he is.’ I mean, *come on.* I’d be lying if I said that I think some bloke like, like Quisby Rakefire is inherently better than me! What happens if I do initial this but I don’t believe any of it? Does the magic in it punish me or something? Am I contractually *obligated* to believe this tripe?” He was breathing very fast. *Focus on the contract, not on Alice.*

She put her face in hands while Frank smirked. “No, Harry!” Alice protested. “I swear, this is just *pro forma* bullshit. No magic in this anywhere! Plus, since you just *initial* it, it doesn’t count as a contract or anything. It really is just a bureaucratic heap of bullshit that you’ll never see again or have to think about again after you sign it. *I swear.*” Frank was nodding.

*I trust her …*

*But not enough.*

“No, I’m sorry … but walk with me back to the Head. I’ll show it to Ab. If he says it’s fine, I’ll initial it immediately.”

Both young Aurors groaned, but accompanied him readily enough.

“So, Quisby Rakefire?” Frank said. “He’s your example of a wizard lower than you?”

When Harry shrugged helplessly and nodded, Frank burst into laughter. “Well, I’d say that’s fair enough. Thanked the fates that I was born a few weeks early, else I would have been in his year and had to share a dorm room with him.”

“Wait –” *Wasn’t Neville’s dad a Gryffindor?* “You were in the same house as him?” he asked incredulously.

“Yep, both Gryffindors.” When Harry continued to look astounded that *Quisby Rakefire* had been a lion, Frank shrugged. “Everyone’s got to go somewhere. I always figured that, whatever else he is, Rakefire certainly had the loud and brash bit down. He still go on about Rosmerta and his rightful future inheritance?”

Harry laughed, continuing to temporarily squelch his horror at Alice’s identity, and the three spent the remainder of the walk telling funny stories about everyone’s least favorite bartender.
They cornered Ab in the head, and when he verified that Harry need not be concerned with initialing the packet, the younger man marked the final page with an ‘H,’ much to the relief of his parole officer.

“See you next month, Harry! Try to be good until then!” Alice trilled as she walked out of the Head with her boyfriend. As the door closed behind him, he heard Frank say into her ear “I see what you mean.”

Harry watched them go, his heart close to breaking. He hoped they had a wonderful date, a wonderful night together.

Because they seemed like a sweet young couple.

Because they’re going to be tortured into insanity in four years’ time.

Bile welled up in his stomach and he barely managed to make it to the private loo next to the kitchen. He violently vomited until he felt like he couldn’t have anything left in his body to expel, then sat on the floor of the loo, eyes vacant.

At some point Ab came in with a glass of clear, cool water that still tasted sour when Harry gulped it down.

“They … I really like them. Especially Alice. She’s … good. In a way that most aren’t.”

Ab nodded wordlessly.

Harry suddenly felt the tears streaming down his face. When did I start crying? He sat there and sobbed for what seemed like forever, Ab making no move to leave but no move towards him.

The words came without him expecting them.

“They – neither of them – they don’t make it through the war! Their son, he’s my mate. I – I know what happens to them! I know when it happens and one of the bastards who does it! And they walked out of here tonight not knowing that their lives are way closer to being over than they are to starting! And I, and I, and I, and I –” his sobbing threatened to render him inarticulate, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe.

He felt Ab’s firm hand on his shoulder and looked up gasping into pale blue eyes.

“And I don’t know how to save them! I can save them, yeah, I think I can, but if I do, won’t that, I don’t know, change things so that I’m not the person I was in the future, and then I don’t ever come back, so I never am here to save them in the first place? I’m just, I’m just not smart enough to know what to do!”

Harry sobbed into the silence.

“Neither ‘m I, lad,” Ab said in a low voice. “I wish I knew the answer for you, but I don’t. We have to fumble through, I suppose. We’re just human, after all.”

A vicious, mounting fury suddenly snapped itself to life inside Harry. “THEN—I—DON’T—WANT—TO—BE—HUMAN!” he roared and clutched his gut as it roiled against him once again.
Aberforth’s hand moved to cup Harry’s cheek. The sudden, unexpected intimacy of the gesture shocked Harry’s rebelling stomach into momentary silence. “I know, lad. Been times I don’t want to be human either. But I am. And you are.”

He suddenly dropped his hand and stood, his face clouding. “Now as for doin’ somethin’ about all this, about savin’ everyone, which you seem so bent on doin’, ever stopped to think that maybe it’s damn foolish to think it’s up to a fifteen year old shrimp to save the bloody world? Ever stopped to think that maybe you think too damn much of yourself to even dare have the notion that you have a chance of savin’ it? Worst type of narcissism, that is. You’re a kid! It ain’t your fuckin’ job!”

Harry stared at Ab with wide, shocked eyes. Ab’s sudden anger made him feel strangely calm, and a lancing clarity stabbed through his mind. He licked his lips. “Maybe. Probably. Yeah, it’s probably not my job to save everyone, or to save the world, or even to save Alice, or my mum, or whoever. Okay, fine. But…” But what? “But I’m the one who has to live with myself. And I can’t do that if I don’t try to do something.”

“I tend my bar, keep myself to myself, an’ I live with myself just fine. I let people save themselves. You haven’t learned it yet, but there will always be another war, another threat, another day some poor, well-meanin’, dumb fuck has to save the world or the helpless or whatever. Nothin’ changes. Best get used to that,” he spat.

“Liar.”

The hissed word lashed out and speared across the room.

Ab rounded on Harry with the speed of a striking snake. “What the fuck did you say?”

Harry stared at him, a creeping numbness invading his entire being. “I called you a liar. You don’t stay out of this war, I know you don’t. I know you do way more spying for your brother than you’ve let on to me. And I know that maybe you think you’ve given up, but that’s bullshit. Because you saved me. At least twice. Once in the Forest when you brought me here, and then again at Macnair’s. You saved me, I think, the first time because you’re a decent person, and decent people save other people when they can. That’s what they do. You saved me the second time because you give a shit about me, and people try to save the ones they care about.” He shook his head violently. “And don’t you dare even try to say that if it was you who’d gone way back in time that you wouldn’t be killing yourself thinking of a way to save Ariana.”

The old man recoiled as if Harry had punched him.

A cold, biting disappointment pumped through Harry, making him feel fierce, making him feel bold. He stood and faced Aberforth. “Don’t you dare stand there and play the worst of hypocrites, trying to make me lose faith in the world even when you haven’t, much as you may wish you had.” Harry curled his hands into fists and scoffed. “I’ll try to save my mum and dad, and Alice, and maybe this stupid, stupid world because I give a shit about them, and because I’m a decent person, and because I think I can actually do something that may be worth something!”

Ab was staring at Harry as if he had never seen him before.

“So, Aberforth Dumbledore, you either help me figure this out, help me do this, whatever I’m going to do, please, or … or just shut the fuck up and mind your business. You say you’re good at that.”
They stood in the grimy, poorly lit loo looking at each for a long time.

Finally Ab sighed and murmured he’d go over his study and “service to wizards” schedules with him in the morning. Harry nodded mutely and slid to the ground after the old bartender had left and closed the door. The cool porcelain felt soothing, and the room was quiet. He sat there as the hours ticked by, thinking about Alice, about his mother and father, about Ab.

*He knows I’m right.*

*He’s a good man.*

*He wishes he’d lost hope, but I know he hasn’t.*

*He’ll come ‘round. He’ll come ‘round.*

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading, and thank you for your comments!
The next morning Ab trudged down and tucked into his breakfast without looking at or speaking to Harry, who was at a loss as to what to do other than return the same treatment.

Of course, both kept eyeing the other when his attention was turned away.

As he folded up his *Prophet*, Ab finally seemed to surrender. “Today you read up on those shields I wanted you to learn. We’ll practice ‘em tomorrow morning when we start workin’ on duelin’. Later Pel’s gonna come and start on your History of Magic with you before you start on the cookin’ for the dinner rush tonight.”

Harry looked at him. *Shields? Dueling? . . . I don’t know what this means, but it seems like he’s at least accepting I need to work on fighting.*

“Sounds good, Ab,” he managed to say neutrally.

“Talked with that Goyle fellow about your service requirement. You’ll be at Hogwarts, of course. Set up a schedule for you, though if you need to be here more or whatever you can change it around a bit. Got you down for twenty hours a’ work a week. Monday through Thursday, 8 in the mornin’ to 1, startin’ next week. That keeps you here on the busy days, but also gives you time in the afternoons and weekends to work on your O.W.L.s.”

Harry mulled over the schedule. “Monday through Thursday in the mornings? Students are usually in classes for most of that. So I don’t have to worry about time-travel complications as much.”

“Aye,” Ab agreed. “Was actually Goyle’s idea. Man was concerned that you’d be a target for the students and wanted to keep you well away from ‘em. ‘Course it’ll be easier come June when they go home. But make no mistake – those that know what you did, older ones especially –may come after you. Others may just try to fuck with you even if they don’t know about Macnair. *Don’t get into fights, and don’t take your wand with you.*”

Harry made to protest that *he* didn’t start fights, they just found him, but Ab talked over him. “I know that’s easy to say, I know. But you fight with the wrong wizard’s little prince or princess, and I’m not sure even Albus could protect you. So try to be smart, be *creative*, and tonight, stop working on that stupid wandless *Alohamora* that ain’t ever goin’ to work and concentrate on how to control that wandless *Accio* of yours so well that you can use it on the sly if you absolutely have to without anyone noticin’.

Nodding, Harry cleared their dishes and began speaking without knowing what he was going to say. “Ab, about last night, I –”
“Shut it.”

“Ab! I –”

“Shut it. You said your piece like a man last night. Don’t fuck it up by acting like a kid today.”

Harry blinked as Ab sighed. “Don’t know what I make of it all yet, lad. We might both just be different brands of fools, for all I can see. But …” he paused uncomfortably. “But I’m thinkin’ on it. And you think on what I said. And we’ll see what comes.”

With a stiff nod he gave Harry a scrap of parchment and turned to leave the room. “Those are the books you need – they’re all on the shelf in my room. Grab them, take ‘em to the stables discreetly, and get to work on those shields. We’ll see if you learned anythin’ tomorrow. If not, your arse is mine,” he finished with relish.

Harry’s arse throbbed in anticipation of what he assumed would be many, many falls to the ground. But Ab was still going to work on fighting with him. It was an olive branch, he understood that, and he accepted it. “Thanks Ab. Thanks.”

He easily found the defense books in Ab’s room, propped up against a tarnished silver picture frame with a grainy photo of a pretty young woman lazily spinning on a swing attached to a great oak. Not Ariana … Maybe I’ll ask Ab about her later.

The next few hours were spent memorizing four new shield spells and all their applications. Harry wasn’t used to studying spells this closely, but he could admit to himself that he wanted to do well for Ab far more than he’d ever wanted to excel for any of his Defense teachers, even Lupin.

Eventually the time came to clean up the two guestrooms that had been let out the night before, and then to await Pel in the stable for his first History of Magic lesson with the old lawyer. This has got to be better than Binns, he assured himself.

Two hour after his lesson with Pel had ended, he grinned to himself about how right he’d been.

Pel was the most engaging teacher Harry had ever had. He came armed this time with a single slim volume entitled The History of the International Confederation of Wizards: The Whole Truth, Including What the Bastards in Power Don’t Want You to Know, by Logius Verian. Harry had raised both eyebrows at the title.

The former barrister shrugged. “It was written by an acquaintance of mine in the Department of Mysteries some years back. Poor sod was the lead researcher on variants of truth-telling spells and potions and used himself too often as a test subject. Couple years later, he couldn’t tell a lie to save his life and got drummed out of the Ministry for telling the Minister exactly why he thought the man’s wife would choose to take up with some French siren.” He paused as Harry chuckled incredulously. “At any rate, his loss is our gain. Bloke wrote a number of history books that don’t whitewash anything. You can probably guess that wizarding Britain banned them all immediately. I’m lucky enough to have gotten copies from him. Now, you take an hour and go over the first two chapters on the ICW’s formation. I’m goin’ to get a pick me up at the bar and come back then.”
Verian’s book turned out to be quite different than bland panegyric that was the Bathilda Bagshot text he had been assigned for years. The man took to rambling digressions that told way more truth than he wanted to know, but were fascinating nonetheless. He vaguely recalled from Binns’ droning lectures that Lichtenstein had refused to attend the first meeting of the newly-formed ICW. While Bagshot had claimed that this was because the new leader of the ICW didn’t agree with them that troll-hunting should be banned, Verian – who was no fan of Bagshot’s – told a much seedier tale. Apparently, Pierre Bonaccord, the first Mugwump, was involved in an illicit affair with a half-troll, and promised his lover’s family that French trolls would have representation in the ICW. However, Bonaccord’s ex-lover, Geliebt Getränkt, was the principal adviser to the Lichtenstein government, and had convinced them not to attend simply out of spite for his errant boyfriend, using the rising number of troll attacks in Lichtenstein as the ostensible excuse. Verian even included copies of steamy love letters–turned scathing missives between Bonaccord and Getränkt that testified to the true reasons for Lichtenstein’s obstinacy.

Wow. History’s a lot dirtier than I expected.

By the time Pel returned – smelling strongly of Firewhiskey – Harry had encountered a number of eye-opening stories about the ostensibly banal origins of the ICW. He easily answered Pel’s questions and listened as the man expounded even more on what Verian had said. One worry, however, nagged at him.

“Pel, uh, thanks for helping me with all this, I really appreciate it. But, er – can I actually write any of this in my O.W.L. exam? Wouldn’t they prefer the more boring version?”

Pel laughed. “Oh don’t worry about that, my young friend! Sure, there’s no way you could get away with writing anything from Verian in a British O.W.L., but you’ll be taking them in Belgium, and Belgians love this sort of thing. I suspect they may even use Verian on the sly. Of course, the Belgians haven’t really done anything to be embarrassed about, at least compared to the British, French, and Germans, so it doesn’t fuss them much.”

He stood. “Well, I’m off back to the pub. We’ll meet this time next week for more, yeah? For then, read the chapters on the development and early history of the International Statue of Secrecy, and write me a short something on the real history and implications of the actions of Emily Rappaport. When you do it, think of at least three different ways to defend her. I don’t give much of a crap for reading essays, but I want to make sure you can write without coming off as an idiot.”

After Pel left, Harry sat back in his straw thinking about his day at what he was secretly calling “Hog’s Head School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.” His first lesson had involved a lot more cursing, alcohol, and interspecies sex than anything he’d encountered at Hogwarts. However, he vaguely recalled that Binns had spent weeks on the formation of the ICW, yet he didn’t really remember anything much from those lectures. A two hour session with Pel and he felt he had a firmer grasp on history than he’d ever had before.

The Hog’s Head School would probably drive Hermione insane. But … but it might just be perfect for me.
Two mornings later and Harry was walking slowly up the path to one of the places he had been most keen to avoid his arrival in the past. *Typical. Live in a the Forest, pretend to be squib, and I still end up going to Hogwarts.*

He sighed and began running through his general plan for the next several months. *Keep my head down, do my work. I’m a squib. Most will be in classes, and if they aren’t, most will ignore me.*

As he rounded a once-familiar bend of the road, the castle spread out before him, the morning light that glanced off the hundreds of windows making the whole building gleam. The Black Lake in the distance glittered in the sun, and even the entrances to the Forbidden Forest seemed less … forbidding than normal. A curl of smoke rose lazily from the chimney of Hagrid’s hut, but today there was no time to stop and see his friend.

Instead, he headed straight for the front gate, having been informed by Goyle via Ab that he was to meet his “liaison” there. He’d been wondering just who this liaison would be. For some reason he expected Professor McGonagall – probably because he associated arriving at Hogwarts with seeing her – or maybe some other professor (*please, please don’t let it be Pemphredo!*), or perhaps a house elf?

He found himself stopping short and biting back a groan the moment he saw the person waiting for him on the other side of the great Hogwarts gate.

*Seriously, universe?*

Lily Evans watched his approach suspiciously, her back rigid and her eyes sharp.

*Why the hell would my mother be my liaison?*

When he reached the gate she drew herself up in a way that reminded Harry just a bit of Percy Weasley. “Mr., ah, Harry, I’m to be the Head Girl here at Hogwarts next year. (*) I’ve been sent because I’m authorized to give you contingent admission through the wards from 8 a.m. until just after lunch. Please take care that you leave no later than 1:30 in the afternoon, lest the Headmaster be informed of an unauthorized presence. Now I shall add you to the wards.” She looked rather nervous as she drew her wand. Harry barely had time to worry that this was probably her first time casting whatever spell she was going to cast before she fired a bolt of painless gold light at him, then the gates. “And now I shall lead you to your first occupation, which should take you several days. I’m told that your liaison will fetch you later this afternoon before your scheduled departure.”

*Oh, so she’s not the person who oversees me. Thank God.*

The gate creaked open as the winged boar statues on either side looked him up and down suspiciously. Lily turned on her heel to begin marching towards the front doors without looking back. Harry had to jog a bit to catch up with her.

She gave him an even more suspicious glance when he drew up to walk beside, rather than behind her.
“It is also my duty to inform you of the code of conduct you must observe while you are on Hogwarts grounds.” She ran through a long list of rules that all essentially amounted to ‘leave magic folk alone and don’t start shit,’ as they walked through the halls of the schools to whatever Harry’s destination was. “Do you understand this code of conduct?” she concluded in a formal voice.

Harry nodded neutrally as she led him towards up flights of stairs towards and down the long corridor on the fourth floor.

At one point she glanced over, the pretense of authority momentarily abandoned. “You don’t seem impressed with the school. You’re barely looking at it!”

_Shit. I’m not supposed to have been here before._

He shrugged silently. _Let her think what she wants about how I feel about Hogwarts. The less I say, the better._

Eventually they reached a tight circular stone staircase that Harry knew led to only one place – the Owlery in the West Tower. It seemed his first job wasn’t going to be all that pleasant or educational.

The two climbed the staircase quickly and Lily led him into the still-cold Owlery. Harry had to physically restrain himself from instinctively looking to Hedwig’s customary perch, the pang of her loss hitting him harder than it had done since he’d arrived in the past.

Lily must have misinterpreted his small grimace, for she smiled tightly. “Yes, your job today and until you complete it satisfactorily is to thoroughly clean the Owlery. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but witches and wizards use owls to carry their post and –”

“I’m aware, thank you.” _Does she know how condescending she sounds?_

She gave a small _hmph._ “Well then, I’ll leave you to it. Just remember, Hogwarts does not condone the sort of actions _you_ engage in.”

Her tone bordered on actual hostility, and Harry couldn’t check the look of surprise that he felt flitter across his face.

Lily narrowed her eyes. “Of course, I know exactly why you’re here – it’s your little punishment for _murder._” Judgment burned in her tone, and Harry felt it scalding him.

_Looks like someone’s a Prophet reader._

_Oh fuck this. I love you mum, but fuck this._

Keeping his tone as light as he could, he responded. “Thank you for your thoughts, Miss – _shite, she never introduced herself_ – Miss Next Year’s Head Girl. I’ll certainly take your morals into account the next time me and my friends are kidnapped, tortured, and about to be murdered simply for _existing._”

Her mouth dropped open, her eyes wide with indignation and shock.
“Now, if you’ll excuse me, it seems I have quite the job ahead of me.” He should have stopped there, but he couldn’t resist. Her whole tone just irritated him. “I do find it rather odd that a school with this many witches and wizards has to rely on manual squib labor to clean its owlery. I would think one could easily do it in seconds with a spell.”

Lily recovered from his earlier retort enough to pull a puzzled face at his last comment. “That’s – that’s actually true … Why would they have you do this?”

He gave her a hard, humorless smile. “I believe it’s metaphorical.” With that he turned and began going over the cleaning supplies in the corner. It took a few minutes before he heard her quiet footsteps exiting through the door and walking slowly down the tower steps.

*Of course it’s metaphorical. Put the squib in with animal shit. Where he belongs.*

He sighed and picked up a large scraping tool that could only be for one thing.

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After nearly four hours of scraping bird shit off stone, Harry was wishing he had time to go into the Forest this afternoon because he seriously felt that he needed to blow some shit up.

Only a few students had visited the Owlery that morning. Three ignored his existence completely, a pair of mealy younger Ravenclaws had snickered at him, and the lone Slytherin had looked at him imperiously before “accidentally” overturning Harry’s bucket of collected droppings. Two little Hufflepuffs had looked at him curiously, but were too timid to attempt a conversation.

The owls, on the other hand, seemed highly offended that he had the audacity to alter than home, so he had to regularly ward off angry, dive-bombing balls of feathers.

A bit after noon, by his estimation, he heard very light steps on the stairs once again and tensed in case a more aggressive student was sneaking up to pay him a visit.

He had to blink several times when his newest visitor turned out to be a kitten. A rust and gray striped kitten holding a neatly folded piece of parchment in its tiny jaws.

The little thing strode over to Harry with all the confidence of any cat and looked up at him, the demand clear in its eyes.

Shrugging, Harry sat down and gently removed the parchment from its mouth. “Er, thank you.”

The demand in its golden eyes remained. “Oh, er, right. Sorry.” Harry let it sniff his hand before beginning to scratch it behind the ears. A rumbling purr resounded through the Owlery, drawing the attention of its hungry occupants. The kitten glared the parliament of owls into submission. “Oh, you’re bloody adorable,” Harry couldn’t help but gush. *Thank Merlin no one was here to hear that.* The kitten closed its eyes in contentment.

Smiling, Harry turned his attention to the parchment.
Mr. Harry: Please come to my office upon receipt of this. You may follow Mrs. Norris, who knows the way. – A. Filch, Hogwarts Caretaker.

No fucking way.

“Mrs. Norris!” Harry bit out. The kitten continued purring. Harry looked at her carefully and realized that yes, add on nearly two decades and a ton of grime, and the kitten could become the evil ball of hissing fur he so knew and despised. “Damn, Mrs. Norris, you look great!” She nuzzled his hand. And you’re a right sight nicer.

“Well, Mrs. Norris, I’m to see Mr. Filch. Would you mind showing me the way?” Of course, Harry knew precisely where the cantankerous old caretaker’s office was, but it wouldn’t do to give that away, even to Mrs. Norris. In his time she had always seemed to know more than one would expect of a cat.

The kitten regretfully hopped away, stuck her tail straight up in the air, and marched out of the room, turning once to make certain that Harry was following her.

Bemused, Harry trailed behind her on the short walk down to the fourth floor corridor where he knew Filch’s office was located. On the way he puzzled over the unexpected tone of Filch’s note. He even said ‘please.’ Weird.

He knocked on the door as Mrs. Norris disappeared through a cat flap. “Come,” a brusque voice responded.

The office looked somewhat similar to what Harry remembered, though it was nowhere even close to approaching the over-stuffed state it would boast in the future. The man seated at the old fashioned desk turned away from his filing cabinets and Harry just barely kept his mouth from dropping open.

Holy shite! That can’t be – yeah, that’s Mr. Filch!

The forty-something-year-old man at the desk had rather poor posture, a hint of the hunchback he would eventually develop, but his caramel-colored hair was neatly-cropped and framed a fairly, well, normal – perhaps even attractive – face, at least in the right light. (*) The frown that seemed cut into his skin and the pale eyes that gazed steadily at Harry were nonetheless eerily familiar.

Merlin, Filch must have had a rough 19 years to go from this to what I remember!

“Have a seat young man,” Filch said in a clipped, if polite tone, gesturing to the dark green leather office chair perched in front of his desk.

“Thank you sir.” Harry felt decidedly wrong-footed. He had no idea what to do with a nice-ish Filch.

The caretaker clasped his hands together and put both elbows on the disk, giving Harry a penetrating look. “I take it the girl they sent explained their rules about your time here, eh?”

“Yes sir. She was quite … thorough.”

Filch sneered. “I take it also that you understood the gist of them.”
Harry nodded.

“And that is?”

“Don’t bug magic folk and don’t start shi – anything.”

Filch nodded and snorted. “That’s about the right of it.” He sat back in his chair. “I’m trying to set your assignments so that you can avoid most students. After the Owlerly – which Dumbledore suggested you do – I’ll be in charge of your work, so if you finish a task, check in with me when you’re done.”

“Yes sir, I will.” This is the most civil I’ve ever seen Filch … I guess it makes sense. He does think I’m a squib after all.

“You’re done for today, so you can go. But listen up and mark my words. The shits out there are spoiled little cretins who think having wands makes them gods. They may well target you for some of their little ‘pranks,’ which usually hurt and always leave a bloody mess that’ll be on you to clean. It ain’t nice, and it ain’t right, but you squawk at all and their mummies and daddies will be here before you can breathe, and it’ll be all your fault. No one cares about the truth when it involves the likes of us. I expect you know that already, but don’t dare forget it.”

“I won’t, sir,” Harry responded quietly. He knew this all too well.

Filch sneered at his desk. “Off with you, then, Mr. Harry. Oh, before you go,” he rummaged in a drawer, “have at ‘em,” and tossed Harry a few chocolate frogs. “Took him off some misbehaving second years, eh?”

Harry laughed. “Thank you, sir, but please just call me Harry.”

“Argus, then.” Harry raised his eyebrow. That would take some getting used to. “Oh, and good work on those scumbag wizards that messed with you. Bloody good work.”

Harry grinned sheepishly and bid the man goodbye – stopping also to wish Mrs. Norris a nice day, to Filch’s surprised approval – before making his way down through the bowels of the castle to the entrance hall.

Just as he was about to leave, a familiar voice called out to him. “Ah, young Harry!” Harry cringed when he realized his first thought was at least he got my name right this time. He stopped and turned, wrestling with the sudden rush of feelings that voice caused to well inside him. Ab’s description of the headmaster as a “political creature” had stayed with him. It was apt, he thought, and Harry couldn’t bring himself to trust a Dumbledore whose motives were part of some giant political game that he couldn’t even begin to understand. At the same time, the old feelings of affection for the man he had known stirred themselves within him. Was he always like this and I just didn’t see it, or did the first war change him into the man I believed I knew?

At any rate, the man was smiling at him genially enough now. “Hello, Headmaster.” I should thank him or something for helping Ab get me out of as much trouble as I should have been in … But the headmaster’s wand raised in favor of his condemnation seemed burned into his brain, regardless of
the helpful intentions behind that action.

Dumbledore didn’t give him time to decide whether or not to express any gratitude. “I do hope you found your first morning at Hogwarts magical!” he beamed.

*I cleaned up owl shit.*

“It’s – it’s a beautiful castle sir.”

“Indeed, indeed she is. I’ve spent almost my entire life here, and yet she can still surprise me!”

Harry smiled and nodded, unsure of what he should say to that.

Dumbledore peered down at him, blue eyes alight. “Although I can’t, regrettably, extend such an invitation every day of your time here helping us, I was wondering if you would like to join me at the Head Table for lunch in the Great Hall? It’s one of the most astounding magical rooms in all of Europe – the ceiling is even enchanted to reflect the outside sky!” He smiled at Harry encouragingly.

If Harry had still been eleven, if Harry had really been a squib who’d never experienced Hogwarts, if Harry was some lost waif disowned by his family, if Harry had been any of those things, he probably would have jumped at the invitation. Dumbledore spoke as if he believed he was offering Harry something of a treat, a rare privilege, and honestly he probably really was.

But this Harry was not some wide-eyed lost young thing. He stood in the entrance hall of Hogwarts, sweaty and disheveled from hard labor, covered in and stinking of bird shit, paying the penance for saving his own life. Walking into the Great Hall, sitting at the Head Table, he’d become a side-show, something for the students to point at, to use to confirm their assumptions that squibs were stupid, dirty things who deserved, at the very best, a sort of patronizing pity. Some of the less prejudiced might look at Dumbledore and praise his magnanimity, his generosity in letting someone who didn’t belong enjoy their world for a day, despite his ‘dark, criminal past.’ Nine months ago, when he had first arrived in the past, he would have refused the invitation because of his fear of changing the timeline. That fear still thrived within him, but it wasn’t the real reason he was going to refuse today.

“Thank you, Headmaster, that’s a very generous invitation,” Harry smiled, trying to make his lips feel less tight than they were. “But I’ve got a lot to do today, so I’m just going to head home now.” He turned and strode to the front door. Opening it, he cast what he hoped was a polite look over his shoulder. “I hope you have a nice afternoon, sir.”

Dumbledore’s brows were furrowed slightly in confusion, but he smiled again nonetheless. “And you as well, my boy.”

Harry was out the door and halfway down the road back to the village before he realized that Filch and Mrs. Norris made rather better impressions on him today than his mother and the Headmaster had.

*Time travel can be so, so confusing.*
13 May, 1977

The next three weeks passed contentedly enough without any real incidents. It took Harry all four days of his first week to finish cleaning the Owlery, though he wasn’t entirely sure how Filch could decide he was actually done. Sure, there were a lot fewer droppings, but the owls had risen valiantly to the challenge of restoring their home to its former, stinking glory.

After that, he’d spent another two days – *strange* days – helping the librarian, a heavily-accented man named Zenodotus Furcsa, track down wayward books. Apparently, this was actually a job that couldn’t be completed in a moment with a wand. Rather, Harry discovered that some of the Darker, more powerful books in the Restricted Section had a tendency to wander off and go undercover, so to speak, in the benign stacks where they gradually attempted to corrupt their more innocent neighbors. The books had long since wised up to their human captors, and had managed to figure out a way to avoid being summoned. Thus it was Harry’s task to hunt down those texts that Furcsa believed had infiltrated the stacks over the course of the school year and to notify the ancient, but still sharp-eyed, old man whenever he had one cornered.

He was too nervous about being caught to attempt to use his time in the library to research spells on the sly, though he did pay close attention to books whose titles suggested they treated either time travel or Dementors. The few he found were quickly added to a list for Pel, who had offered to try to research Harry’s predicament.

The rest of that second week had been spent helping Professor Sprout in the greenhouses. She was pleasant enough, certainly, but couldn’t seem to stop herself from making sure that Harry understood *she* wasn’t like the rest of the bigoted wizarding world.

“It’s so terrible what they do to you poor folk,” she had gushed on the first day. “In fact, as a child some of my very best friends were squibs. The things we got up to … well, I won’t bore you.” She had paused thoughtfully. “I do wonder whatever happened to them … I suppose I haven’t heard from Susie – she was my best friend before Hogwarts – since I was eleven or so …”

And later: “I don’t understand why folks say squibs are so useless. Look at you, you can clearly pot a plant and sweep a floor just as well as anyone! Why, I’ve always said that squibs *can* be contributing members of society, we just need to find the right sort of jobs for them!”

And finally: “Well done, my dear! Such a sweet young man you are! Have I mentioned that some of my best friends were squibs?”

*Only about ten times.*

Harry was glad to leave the greenhouses on the last day of that week.

After that he’d been delighted to spend this third week helping Hagrid. For the first time his service at Hogwarts felt more like a return to his first home than a punishment. Much of the week saw Colin delightedly following Harry all around the grounds, to the shock of those few students and professors who could actually see his companion.

Hagrid had been dumbfounded by Harry’s facility with his charges, though the boy desperately wanted to tell him that he himself was principally responsible for everything Harry knew about
creatures. He’d been worried that he’d revealed too much when he’d automatically bowed upon seeing Windracer, a lanky brown hippogriff, but Hagrid had just proudly proclaimed he was a natural.

This week had seen him introduced to a number of creatures he hadn’t yet had experience with, including Porlocks, a large family of which resided in the thestrals’ winter stables, Bowtruckles, and Knarls, which followed him around for the better part of a morning for some unknown reason. In the back of his mind, Harry hoped his time with Hagrid helped him on his upcoming O.W.L.s., but at least he wasn’t dealing with anything as alarming as Blast-Ended Skrewts.

His afternoons and evenings were largely now spent in the stable or Forest studying. Ab had procured the fifth year Charms and Transfiguration texts for him, and Harry was steadily trying to work his way through them, though without peers to compare himself to or professors to grade him it was hard to say if he was making normal progress. He’d enjoyed another few history lessons with Pel, as well as several sessions of “Getting My Arse Handed to Me 101,” otherwise known as Ab’s DADA lessons. Soon enough, the old man promised, they’d start working on Potions. When he heard this, Harry tried to avoid imagining Ab striding about the pub kitchen in black robes that billowed just so, but was unsuccessful and dissolved into giggles.

Ab was less than amused.

After he had strung up the last of the dead ferrets Hagrid would use that afternoon to work on training Windracer, he bid farewell to the half-giant and headed through a glade towards the gate that would lead him to the path back to Hogsmeade.

As he rounded a corner he was suddenly met with a group of more than a dozen students – sixth or seventh years, judging by their height – who looked to be setting themselves up for a Care of Magical Creatures practical lesson.

“Is that him?”

“He’s the one who –”

“…seriously, a wizard-killer!?”

“–s’a squib, yeah?”

“— killed —!”

Shite. Keep moving.

Harry refused to duck his head, but quickened his pace almost imperceptibly. It wasn’t enough.

“Oi! You! Squib!” A rough voice bellowed out.

Harry could have kept walking, but he couldn’t bring himself to offer his back as an easy target. He turned in the direction of the voice, face calm and neutral.

“Yes?”
A bulky, dark-haired Slytherin who looked to be some relation to Marcus Flint, the captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team back in the 1990s, was standing with his wand trained on Harry.

“So you’re the little shit who killed a wizard.” The boy scoffed. “You don’t look like much. Maybe we should teach you to respect your betters.” Two other boys in green and silver ties laughed.

*What is it with wizards and talking about being someone’s “better”?

Harry sighed.

*Don’t fight. Be creative, Ab said in his head.*

“Oh, okay,” Harry agreed, casually folding his arms across his chest.

“Huh?” one of Probably-a-Flint’s companions asked.

Harry made a polite ‘get on with it,’ gesture. “I said, ‘okay,’ as in, I suppose you can go ahead and give it your best.” The three Slytherins sputtered. Probably-a-Flint looked like he wanted to start casting spells, but Harry’s attitude had confused him.

“What are you doing?” asked a Hufflepuff girl in shock. “They can really hurt you!”

Although his every instinct was screaming at him that it was a bad idea, he nonetheless turned away from the threat before him and smiled humorlessly at the girl. “Yes, they can. But I don’t think that they plan to kill me, which is what the rest of the wizarding world would do to me if I defend myself right now. So, between death and torture, I’ve got to go with torture.”

Several of the students looks confused, others scandalized, a few looked extremely guilty.

Harry turned back to Probably-a-Flint. “In any case, please do get on with it. Or not.” He shrugged. “Either way, let’s make a decision, as I have plans for the rest of my afternoon.”

The three boys looked angry but hesitant. This confrontation clearly hadn’t gone the way they had expected.

*They aren’t going to do anything. They want to look big and tough, but they’re too confused to do it now.*

“Hey – what are you snakes up to?” came a voice from behind Harry that made the hair on his neck rise.

“Looks like they’re thinking of messing with dear Squibbulus here, Prongs.” Shit. Really, Sirius?

Harry wanted to bury his face in his hands as his dad and godfather suddenly stepped in front of him, wands brandished and pointed at the Slytherins, their shoulders raised and heads cocked in a most dramatic, most noble, pose. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lupin flank them, along with – he growled internally – a chubby little teenaged fucking Peter Pettigrew.
“Don’t kill him. Don’t kill him. Figure all that out later. Don’t kill him. Don’t kill him.

“Well, in that case, Padfoot, I say we have to defend the poor bugger,” James smiled, his eyes flashing.

_The fight was already over before it started, you dumb shits!_

“I hardly think that necessary,” Harry observed, allowing his annoyance to bleed into his tone as amusement.

Sirius kept his wand and eyes on Probably-a-Flint, but addressed Harry over his shoulder. “Quiet, Squibbulus. Don’t get involved in things you don’t understand.”

“There’s a war on, kid,” James added in dread seriousness.

“So get out of the way and let us fight it,” Sirius finished.

“What do you say, Padfoot, we can nail them with some choice pranks later, but for now should we show everyone what little Flint has to offer under his pants? _Levicorp—_

Harry had learned much more about self-control in his time as a squib than he ever thought he would. But, he could admit to himself, he was still a bloody Gryffindor. And bloody Gryffindors aren’t known for their restraint.

He laughed. It was a mocking, derisive laugh, there was no hiding that, and it brought his father up short.

“Really? I, of all people, ‘don’t understand?’? ‘There’s a war on?’” he parodied. “Are you, seriously, are you stupid?” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lupin plant his head in his palm. Harry didn’t wait for a response. “Why, yes I am aware of the current war, and I think I understand what it means better than either of you.”

The two Marauders forgot the Slytherins and rounded on Harry.

“Look,” he continued, before either could respond, “you two seem to think that war is like some fight at school. That you’ll curse at each other a few times until a teacher stops it and then reminisce over dinner about how you made your enemy puke slugs or show his pants or something stupid.”

Harry’s bitter amusement was morphing into a sharp, dangerous fury. He wasn’t sure if he was being unfair to his father and godfather, but he didn’t _care._

_You die when you’re twenty-one, Dad! Is this how you fought the war? Like a game? Like a fight against another House? Did you just not take it seriously enough?_

_Is this why you died?_

_Is this why I grew up alone?_
“That’s not what this war is, you stupid fucks! You fight here at your school for, for what? Your reputations, to prove how cool you are. Out there, in the real world where there aren’t teachers or mummies and daddies to run to, you’re fighting for your fucking lives.” Macnair’s face grinned as he stabbed his shoulder. Crucio, Crucio, Crucio. Kill the spare. Cedric’s empty eyes. “Christ, only bullies and kids treat war like a fucking game. And I bet that they’re the first to die.”

He noticed that a few of the gathered students looked stricken but were nodding slowly, Remus Lupin among them.

“So puff yourselves up and strut around your school like war heroes all you like. Run home to your mummies or to your Heads of House if things don’t go your way and you get hit with an embarrassing spell. But don’t you dare try to tell me what war is.”

James and Sirius glared at Harry as if he were Voldemort himself, their wands pointed at his chest.

“I mean really, just look at you now,” he remarked, suddenly just so weary of it all. “Someone says something you don’t like, and it’s ‘wands out! Get the enemy!’” He shook his head bitterly. “Go back to your classrooms, and Great Halls, and parents. Please. Leave the real world for those of us who know how to live in it.”

With that he walked directly between the two snarling, sputtering Gryffindors, past a shocked looking trio of Slytherins, and out of the glade on the path to the gate. His back was in a rictus of anxiety, waiting to be hit by a spell sent from someone in either group, but nothing ever came.

Instead, Harry walked on unmolested and found Goat grazing just outside the gate. She nudged his hand for a head rub, then silently fell into step at his side.

Harry wasn’t sure how he felt as he walked back to the village. He was disappointed in the way James and Sirius acted, but as his temper cooled he knew that it probably wasn’t all that different from how he and Ron may have behaved with regard to Malfoy and his cohorts. It had probably been unfair to talk down to them as he had, but their condescension and bravado – and their stupid, bloody innocence – aggravated him to no end.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he could easily ignore the various glares and disapproving shakes of their heads that he earned from most of the villagers as he passed by. Indeed, he barely noticed anything other than his own musings and Goat’s presence until the realization hit him that he had walked past the turn that took him to the Hog’s Head a few blocks back.

And so maybe it was simply luck – or fate, or design, or coincidence – that brought Harry to the point in the road that faced the side wall of the Hogsmeade Post Office. As he raised himself out of his turbulent thoughts, he could not miss the new addition to the normally-smooth gray stone in front of him.

Scrawled – wait, no, carved – into the stone in sharp, uneven letters at least a foot high each, was a single phrase.

_A SOUL FOR A SOUL_
Harry’s stomach dropped as the memory slammed into him.

_Suddenly a voice sounded in the nothing. Though no louder than falling snow, it cut across the emptiness, so shocking in the endless silence that the words seemed to tattoo themselves in the not-air ... A soul for a soul, little wizard ..._

He stared in horror at the graven words.

_What the – ?_

_No way._

_Oh God._

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is, of course, inspired by the famous line in Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall, Part II" (1979).

(*) On Lily meeting Harry at the gates: this is the product of a foolish mistake. I wasn’t thinking when I first wrote this and had Lily as Head Girl, but she’s only a sixth year at this point. I needed their conversation, though, since it becomes important for Lily and Harry’s relationship later, so I kept it under the admittedly shaky reasoning that she’s just learning the necessary components of the job (even though I know that Head Students aren’t informed of their positions until summer.) So, um, just go with me on this one?

As always, thanks for reading and for your comments.
12 May, 1977

“And you’re sure that’s what it said?” Pel asked.

Harry threw up his hands in frustration. “Yes! It’s not something I’m going to forget, Pel! ‘A soul for a soul.’ That’s exactly what the Dementor said in my head when it Kissed me, just before I came back to this time. And the words were carved there on the wall, plain as I’m seeing you in front of me now.”

The stable door banged open, startling them both, as Ab strode in. “Message is gone now, but I checked with ol’ Strix Reuters at the Post Office and yeah, that’s what it said. He had it removed himself, but has no idea who put it there or why. Just said it wasn’t there when he opened this morning.”

“This means –” Harry’s head buzzed with possibilities. “Shite, I don’t know. What does this mean?”

Pel rubbed his face with his hand. “Well, I’d say that someone knows something about what happened to you, but there’s no way to tell exactly what they may or may not know.”

Ab cursed. “Could even have been some seer who got a whiff a’ your past and tranced out to write it. They may have already forgotten havin’ even done it.”

“You really think that’s what happened?” Harry asked, his doubt evident.

It was Pel who answered. “My friend, there’s no telling right now who did this or why. Or really what it means. I suppose we’ll just have to keep on our toes. The fact that it was on the Post Office rather the Head is rather encouraging. You’ve no connection to that building, have you?”

Harry shook his head and Ab sighed. “Pel, can you keep at lookin’ in to all this? I know it ain’t exactly your thing, but you’re the best we got at it now. Just keep trying to find anythin’ you can on Dementors, the Kiss, time travel, whatever.”

“Of course, I will, but so far … there just isn’t much. The books whose titles Harry saw in the library say nothing that’s at all related to all this.”

“I really appreciate you trying, Pel,” Harry said.

“And remember,” Ab added, “we gotta be vigilant. Keep our eyes an’ ears open.”

Harry grunted a half-laugh. The bartender reminded him more than ever of Mad-Eye Moody today.
“‘Constant vigilance’ it is, then.”

A thought occurred to him. “Hey, Ab, did you ever figure out a way to ask the headmaster about all the Death Eaters I saw in the graveyard and his pensieve?

“Mostly no, figured out it wouldn’t matter. I checked them out first. Half of ‘em are either still students – hell, Crouch is a bleedin’ fourth year – and most of the others he already knows about – Karkaroff, for example, he’s in charge of recruitment at Durmstrang apparently, but it’s out of Britain’s jurisdiction either way. I did ask him if he thought the younger Malfoy was joinin’ up – Albus didn’t seemed surprised, but didn’t know. As for Rookwood, the one you said was passin’ information to Voldemort from the Department of Mysteries,” Ab scowled and shook his head, “well, I never heard the name so I had Pel root around his old Ministry contacts. No record of any living wizards with that surname. At all. Last one he could find was a Domitian Rookwood who died sometime in the 1920s. Told Albus I heard the name in passing an’ he doesn’t remember ever having a Rookwood as a student.”

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t exist. The people in the Department of Mysteries often go by codenames or have their personal records erased. And there’s no reason this Rookwood can’t have gone to school elsewhere,” Pel added thoughtfully.

Ab grunted. “Like I said, we just gotta keep our eyes an’ ears open.”

“That’s it?” Harry sighed.

The older men could only shrug.

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18 May, 1977

Remus Lupin raised an eyebrow when he entered his Potions class on Wednesday. The squi– the kid who’d so wound up his best friends was assigned to Professor Slughorn today. He was busy preparing potions ingredients at a small work table in the corner behind the professor’s desk, his body turned to the classroom only in profile, his chin-length black hair tied back out of his face with a leather string.

Remus turned to see two of his best friends – Peter hadn’t made the grade to qualify for NEWT Potions – watching the boy with dark looks on their faces. They weren’t about to forget the verbal spanking he had given them the previous week.

The young werewolf held back a chuckle. Granted, the kid had seemed to Remus more than a little arrogant and self-righteous – I mean really, one fight, no matter how serious, doesn’t make someone some great and wise veteran – but still … wounding Prong’s and Padfoot’s pride was a difficult thing to do, and the boy had managed it spectacularly.

“Pompous little prat!” Sirius had groused later that night. “Acting all don’t mess with me, I know all about war when he’s just another kid!”

“Yeah … but he has actually killed a Death Eater …” Peter had pointed out uncertainly.
Sirius and James had scowled at that. “Well, maybe it’s about time we actually do something too,” James had muttered with a significant look to Sirius.

*Yeah, that kid lit a fire under their arses.*

Yet his reluctant admiration for the way that the kid had so gotten under his friends’ skins didn’t lessen Remus’ own unease about the squi – boy. He had long been obsessing over the boy’s comments to him at the Hog’s Head some months ago, when he had all but said he somehow knew about Remus’ condition and his romps in the Forest on the full moon. The other Marauders had been furious and had wanted to break into the pub and cast some secrecy binding spell or other on the kid, but Remus didn’t have the heart to let his friends break into private property and assault some defenseless boy.

The boy’s subsequent trouble with the Ministry, on the other hand, sure proved that he wasn’t as defenseless as Remus had thought and, more importantly, had convinced James and Sirius that breaking into the Hog’s Head and targeting the kid was *a very bad idea*. If the sq – boy didn’t manage stop them, then they were convinced the terrifying owner would.

Lily and Marlene in front of him were watching the boy as well, as was, he discovered as he cast his eye about the room, just about the entire class. The boy *had* to feel the eyes of more than a dozen teenagers on him, but there was no pause in the staccato beat of his knife as he chopped pungous onions, and his face was blank.

As he gazed bluntly at the boy (*what was his name again?*), it suddenly occurred to Remus that he didn’t really seem the type to blab about Remus’ lycanthropy, unless Remus or the Marauders forced his hand. He could have said something during the argument the other day, but he hadn’t … *And he’s a squib. Sirius may be right that he’s a prat, but he does know what the world is like, especially for people like us. All he really did back then was warn me. Pretty politely, actually, given the circumstances.*

A few of the Slytherins were mumbling angrily, but the arrival of the corpulent Professor Slughorn staved off any potential plans they may have been forming, at least for the moment.

“Ah, here you all are! Now, I see that you’ve noticed we’re being joined today by a guest!” Slughorn beamed at the class. “Young mister – ah – this fine young man (*he doesn’t remember the boy’s name either, Remus thought*) is simply here to help me prepare ingredients for the bulk potions I’ll be making to help resupply the Hospital Wing, so let’s just leave him be, shall we?”

“But sir,” Wendy Slinkhard simpered, “if a squib touches magical ingredients, doesn’t it, like, render them powerless for use in potions?”

The boy continued chopping, as if oblivious.

“Oh ho, that old wives’ tale Miss Slinkhard? I would think someone in my own House would know better than to believe that little myth. In fact, E. M. L. Potions, run by very dear old friend Euclid Lawrence of the Hampshire Lawrences, uses squib labor for the preparation and packaging of many of its ingredients. A clever move that helps him keep his costs down so low!”

Some of the Slytherins looked scandalized. So did Lily and the Hufflepuffs, though Remus suspected it was for an entirely different reason than the Slytherins.
“So, have no fear of any adverse effects on our stores because of this, ah, young man’s help. Indeed, I’ve found he’s quite the dab hand with a knife!”

Remus winced. **Did he seriously just say that out loud?**

Dead silence blanketed the room, marred only by the steady *chop chop chop* of the boy cutting onions.

Slughorn’s face flushed so deep a red it was almost purple as he realized his gaffe. Chuckling awkwardly, the professor quickly moved on to quizzing them about the various ingredients for the Polyjuice potions that they were set to start on that day.

“Now then, that’s Lacewing flies, leeches, powdered bicorn horn, knotgrass, Boomslang skin, Valerian sprigs all sorted, but really, can *no one* tell me the last ingredient needed – other than a bit of the person whom one plans on turning into, of course!?”

Remus looked around. Snape definitely could have, if he wasn’t busy gazing at Lily, and Lily probably could have, but she was too busy muttering about something under her breath to Marlene.

A tiny movement in the corner of the room caught Remus’ eye. Squinting, he saw the boy – still chopping away – mouth *fluxweed* to himself, seemingly unaware that he was doing so.

*Why not?* Remus raised his hand. “Fluxweed, sir?”

“Ah, there now, Mr. Lupin, I knew you had to have made it into this class somehow! Very good, five points to Gryffindor. Now you’ll need to pick your fluxweed …”

Padfoot and Prongs stared at him in shock. Potions, after all, was not one of Remus’ strong points. A glance at the squib – boy showed a very tiny small playing across his face.

*No, he won’t tell on me.* Remus was hit by the sudden conviction, though where it came from he couldn’t say, and then felt several stones’ worth of anxiety lift from his shoulders.

Soon the dungeon was filled with plumes of smoke as the bases for their Polyjuice potions simmered over their burners. Slughorn paraded around the class, offering little pointers here and here, especially to his favorites. He spent nearly twenty minutes speaking to Lily about Merlin-knows-what. Meanwhile, Remus’ ears pricked up at a whispered conversation from the Slytherin side of the room.

*“It’s the gold one, not the blue one, that’s counter-indicated for pungous onions, you moron,”* hissed Snape.

*“This’ll really show that piece of shit,”* another boy muttered.

Remus turned just in time to see Malquim Avery lob a golden jarlsap pod directly at the pungous onions on the boy’s cutting board.

It seemed to sail through the air in slow motion, rotating lazily as it bore down on the tray.
Lupin wasn’t good enough at Potions to remember exactly what the effect of combining a jarlsap pod with pungous onions was, but he was damn sure it was bad if Snape was in on it. He opened his mouth to say something – a warning, he supposed – but then found himself simply gaping.

Without even turning his head, the boy snapped out his hand and caught the pod, which made a satisfyingly solid slap as his fingers curled around it. He didn’t look to find his attacker, didn’t call out to Slughorn, didn’t do anything, really, just set the pod well out of the way of the onions in the far corner of his table and continued chopping.


Remus raised his eyebrows and fought not to grin. Yeah, the kid might be arrogant, but you can’t say he doesn’t have style.

Harry smothered his smile as he carefully put the pod on the corner of the worktable. It would be easy enough to slip it into his mokeskin pouch when the students left and Slughorn turned his attention to preparing his next lesson.

**Thank you, greasy git!**

He and Ab had found that their work on Potions was severely hampered by their lack of access to a number of ingredients that were too expensive for them to purchase. These same materials, however, were in ready supply at Hogwarts. His three days with Slughorn so far had netted him quite the tidy haul. The jarlsap pod alone was worth at least three galleons and would provide enough of the sap for several potions.

At first Harry had felt squeamish about stealing from Hogwarts, but Ab had reminded him that his fifth year tuition had probably already been deducted from his Gringotts account in the future before he was Kissed.

So really, Hogwarts owed him.

Potions preparation was quickly becoming his favorite job after working with Hagrid. Sure, Slughorn turned out to be a smarmy bastard who made certain to highlight Harry’s squib status in every class (yet still couldn’t be bothered to learn his name), but he was also a far superior teacher to Snape. As Harry sliced, diced, minced, shredded, peeled, and squeezed, he kept his ears trained on Slughorn, whose lectures were surprisingly informative and even entertaining. After three days of five hours each in the Potions lab, Harry felt he had learned more than he had in his entire fourth year.

And attending today’s sixth year class was definitely proving worthwhile. Of course, Mini-Snape and his crony hurling the jarlsap pod at him was pure luck, but he had to admit it felt good to hear Sirius’ shocked curse when he caught the thing. *Finally getting to put those Seeking abilities to good use again, I suppose.*

It was strange feeling the eyes of so many people he knew, but who didn’t know him, on his back. Snape, Lily, Sirius, James, Professor Lupin … All the real Marauders at school again.
As he continued to chop the foul-smelling magical onions, he found himself wondering what sort of things his dad and friends would be getting up to during the night’s full moon. Sure, the Marauders’ behavior annoyed him, but deep down he still cherished a rather romantic view of his father’s school years. Becoming illegal animagi, sneaking around under the Invisibility Cloak, using the Marauders’ Map to play pranks …

He barely refrained from slapping his own face.

The Marauders’ Map! I completely forgot about the Marauders’ Map! All they have to do is look at it once and see me on it, and I’m completely humped!

Harry stewed over the problem as the class ended and he surreptitiously pocketed the jarsap pod, some fluxweed, boomslang skin, and a few other goodies. Slughorn barely reacted when Mrs. Norris showed up to escort Harry out of the castle now that his five hours of prescribed servitude had ended for the day. As he followed the kitten, its tail hitched high like a medieval standard, the memory of either Lupin or Sirius talking about the Map hazily flitted across his mind.

It was something … something about how they lost it. It got – it got – oh! It got confiscated in their seventh, or maybe their sixth year … Fred and George found it in Filch’s office in their first year, and gave it to me when they were fifth years!

Harry glanced at Mrs. Norris, a plan forming in his mind. I can’t remember if it was their sixth or seventh year … but that doesn’t matter. I’ll definitely change the timeline if I don’t do anything.

“Mrs. Norris? Mrs. Norris?” The kitten stopped and turned to look at him, sitting delicately on her haunches. “Uh, I know it’s about time for me to go, ma’am,” – did I seriously just call a kitten ‘ma’am’? – “but there’s something important that I think Mr. Filch should know about.”

The kitten eyed him.

He crouched down. “Really! I think some Gryffindors are planning something!”

Mrs. Norris arched and curled herself around his outstretched hand. He gave her a thorough scratching behind her ears. “Please, can you take me to wherever Mr. Filch is?”

The kitten returned to her earlier position ahead of him, hitched her tail up, and took off in the direction of the Charms corridor. Smiling, Harry followed.

A few minutes later and Harry found Filch attempting to wash some graffiti off a statue of Kallipygia of Keos, the witch who once had wooed a thousand warlocks. The man turned with a glare when Harry first addressed him but, on seeing who it was, the glare almost melted into a smile. Almost.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Fi – I mean, Argus, but I saw something that I thought you should know about.” The man arched a suspicious eyebrow. “See, I was leaving the dungeons when I saw three Gryffindors – I think their names are Black, Lupin, and Potter – holding a huge, folded parchment that was a bit beat up. They were saying things like ‘Filch won’t catch us since we have this!’ and ‘it’ll be a great prank so long as no one finds the parchment.’ I don’t know what the parchment was, but I thought it might be something they shouldn’t have or that would cause you trouble.”

Now Filch really smiled.
The caretaker stopped him on his way to the dungeons early the next morning. Filch tossed him a few – probably confiscated – pumpkin pasties and grinned.

“Thanks for the tip, Harry. Don’t rightly know what that parchment was, but those four idiots who call themselves the Marauders all looked near tears when I caught ‘em out and relieved ‘em of their possession of it. Tucked away nice and safe in my secure files now.”

Harry smiled back. “Glad to hear it, Argus, and I’m happy to help.”

Filch walked away whistling a jaunty tune, while Harry considered the best ways to get access to the man’s files and borrow the Map for himself.

As long as it’s back there in time for Fred and George’s first year, it’s all mine. Sorry Marauders, but your sacrifice is for a good cause.

June 17, 1977

Spring passed into early summer with a flurry of activity. Harry continued to try to learn from Ab, Pel, and his unsuspecting ‘instructors’ at Hogwarts. Between his studies, his service to wizards, and helping Ab and Quisby keep the Head running, Harry felt as though he’d never get a moment to just hang out in the forest with Colin and Goat again.

Indeed, manning the Head in the early evenings before Quisby showed up was starting to become Harry’s responsibility, as was getting things ready for the day on the weekends. Ab had taken to disappearing at random times, only to stomp in later looking even more cross than normal.

“Oi, ‘Arry,” Mundungus Fletcher had whispered one night in early June, “ya fink ol’ Ab has hisself a secret girlfriend?”

Harry had blinked and tried not to form a mental picture of Ab and some woman together doing – oh, too late. He pulled a tortured face. “Thanks, Dung, I can’t unsee that now.”

“He can ‘ave me Vera!” A drunken Dalcop offered magnanimously.

“Ah, everyone who’s anyone already has!” retorted Martial Sorner.

Harry had cursed them all as he mopped up the puddle from the tankard Dalcop had emptied over Martial’s head for that one. Apparently Dalcop could say whatever he wanted about his wife, but no one else better dare to.

It seemed everyone else was busy as well. The Aurors, he heard, had been inundated with calls about domestic disputes, petty theft, public drunkenness, and public brawling. As the war slowly heated up, so did everyone’s tempers. Auror Alice had even sent Harry a last minute message to meet her instead at the Three Broomsticks for their monthly check-in. He found her in the kitchens in the middle of roasting the old homeless man they’d seen on their first walk through the village. The thoroughly shnockered man had taken to throwing bread loafs at the cooks and cursing inarticulately.

“Meeting time, Harry,” Alice had called with a grin as she crouched to stun the drunken wizard.
"You doing anything illegal that I should know about, and are you still respecting wizards – *Stupefy!* – as your betters, blah blah – *Stupefy!* – blah?"

The man fell to the ground in a heap.

"Nope, nothing illegal that you should know about, and sure, still licking the boots of every wand-wielder I see." Harry responded from behind a half-open door, thoroughly amused.

"Great," she huffed as she put magic-dampening cuffs on the man. "Good talk! See you next month." And she and the loaf-chucking carouser were gone in a crack of apparition.

Today, however, as Harry returned from a rather, ahem, productive morning in the greenhouses (Sprout didn’t really supervise him much at all as she set him to pruning non-threatening herbs, which gave him plenty of chances for opportunistic harvesting of various magical plants), he found Ab sitting at a table in the still unopened public room, apparently waiting for him.

"Sit."

Harry sat, giving Ab a searching look. "What’s going on?"

The old bartender looked at him in frank appraisal. "Wasn’t sure if I should tell you this, but … well, s’ppose you should know." He sat back in his chair. "Shit’s probably goin’ to go down, and soon. You are not to get involved, you hear me?"

"Huh? What – what are you talking about?"

"I’m sure by now you’ve figured out I use the pub to get information, yeah? Stuff about that Dark Lord and his boys that I tell my brother?"

Harry nodded impatiently.

Ab sighed. "Well, me an’ some others who keep an eye on different folks have all been hearin’ rumblin’ about the same thing. Talk that the Death Eaters have somethin’ planned for the day Hogwarts sends the kids home for the year."

Harry sat forward in excitement. "But that’s next Friday! What are they going to do?"

Ab shook his head. "No one’s really sure. Some mutterin’ about the Hogwarts Express. My brother thinks that they’re goin’ to attack the train on its way to Kings Cross, or maybe hit Platform 9 ¾ itself. Him and his band a’ lobcocks are settin’ up guards on the train an’ outposts with folks ready to Apparate in all along the route and at the station."

Though he was rather curious about this “band of lobcocks” of the headmaster’s, Harry pushed that off for later. "But, what? You don’t think that’s the plan?"

"I don’t know! Maybe." Ab bit out in frustration. "But it makes no bloody sense for Voldemort to attack a train full of kids, especially since a bunch of ‘em are his own followers’ sprogs. Man’s still trying to get recruits, build up credibility for his cause, see? Worst thing he could do right now is show himself to be a murderous lunatic who’ll even threaten pureblood kiddies. Same problem if he hits the platform."

*That … that makes a lot of sense.*
Harry bit his lip in confusion. “So why does Dumbledore think that he’ll do it?”

“Albus knows this man, says he isn’t the most stable a’ sorts. I don’t know …” Well, Dumbledore has a point there. Some of Voldemort’s plans in my time weren’t exactly sensible. “Hitting the train or the platform would be a big statement, and Albus reckons that Voldemort’s gettin’ tired of stayin’ relatively quiet. Nothing big’s happened since Hayle but for those attacks on the outreach offices.”

“So what do you think he’s going to do?”

A dark cloud settled over Ab’s features as the man sighed. “Honestly? I’m not really sure. But if he ain’t goin’ for drama … well, me and a few others I know suspect whatever he’s plannin’ will happen way after the Express gets to London. All the kids from magical households’ll just Floo, Portkey, or Side-Along home. But the muggleborns … they’ll have to go through the station to cars and other trains with their families.”

A lead weight settled in Harry’s stomach. “You think he’s going to go after them, don’t you?”

“Aye, I suspect so. I just don’t think he’s ready to piss off the purebloods who might be considerin’ supportin’ him. But the muggleborns … Hell, takin’ some of them out might actually win some folks over to his side, and it’ll certainly please the ones already there. But if he does this, then whatever he’s goin’ to do to them though, won’t be big or flashy, I reckon. He’s not gonna send Death Eaters to fight in the middle of the muggle part of Kings Cross – he might be evil, but I can’t see anyone in his spot riskin’ alienatin’ his base by violating the Statue a’ Secrecy … No, it’s gonna be quiet, that’s my bet. Quiet and clever. Maybe just follow them right to their homes and kill ‘em there. Make it a muggle problem, not something for the Aurors to care about.”

In his mind’s eye, Harry imagined Hermione happily chattering to her parents about her adventures that year as masked figures in black robes burst in and filled her kitchen with green light.

“And … and is Dumbledore planning anything in case this is Voldemort’s plan?”

“No. He ain’t. Like I said, he thinks the attack’ll be on the train itself or the platform.” Ab sighed. “To be fair, he does only have so many people to work with. He just can’t cover both possibilities.”

“Fuck,” Harry breathed. “But what about the Aurors? Why does his group or whatever have to be the only ones taking care of this?”

“Think, boy! DMLE’s sure to have some of his spies in it. At least Albus is able to try to protect folks with people he can trust aren’t spies.”

Harry refrained from rolling his eyes and reminding Ab of Peter Pettigrew. He wouldn’t be a spy for at least a while yet anyway.

“Now,” Aberforth continued gruffly, “I’ve been workin’ with some folk who are concerned about the possible targetin’ a’ Muggleborn and we’re tryin’ to get things set up –”

“You’re helping?!?” Harry blurted out incredulously.

Ab glared. “Aye, I am. I’ve been told that doin’ what you can to save people is the sort’a thing decent folk do,” he retorted in a flat voice.
Harry bit back a smile and said nothing. *He … he really listened to me that night, I guess.*

“*Anyhow, we’ve got a plan –*”

“Can I know what it is?”

“Well you will, if you’d stop bloody interruptin’ me!” Ab snapped back and Harry mumbled an apology. “As I was tryin’ to say, I’ve been workin’ with some folks to set somethin’ up. The sister of a man who works for the Department of Magical Transportation – Caradoc Dearborn’s his name – is teaching Muggle Studies at the school this year. She’s been tryin’ to *discreetly* warn the muggleborn that they might be in some real danger, though she’s gotta be careful it don’t get back to my brother or to the Ministry. Both want to avoid a panic, so aren’t really contacting the muggleborn families at all about the war if they can help it. So far she’s got about twelve muggleborn and their families in the know. Doc Dearborn’s managed to get portkeys authorized for most of ‘em on the sly. They’ll take the keys to the port in Hull, where there’ll be a boat waitin’ to take ‘em all on to Belgium. After that, they’ll probably try to find places for themselves at Beauxbatons or Ilvermorny or wherever.”

Harry furrowed his brow. “Why not just portkey them straight to Belgium?”

Aberforth shook his head. “Impossible to get permission for that many international portkeys without goin’ through a couple of Ministry offices. We know that he has spies all over the Ministry, so we can’t risk any a’ them noticin’. Plus, it’d be a job to get international portkeys for muggleborns, let alone their families.” He paused thoughtfully. “Originally thought to put them on one those muggle flyin’ things, er –”

“Airplanes,” Harry supplied.

“Aye, those. But the notion of trying to protect somethin’ that high up that could be hit by a spell from the ground had us all too worried. Boat’s much easier to guard, see? Anyhow, it’s goin’ to be a big job. We can’t just meet the families at the station, as that calls attention to what we’re up to and might start a fight in the middle of Kings Cross. Different groups of us are set to meet up with a couple of families each at their houses or in London to get them to the harbor with portkeys and by Side-Along.”

Harry nodded slowly, taking it all in. This was all very … involved. “Let me help – I can fight.”

Ab snorted. “Like hell. You’re too young, you ain’t good enough yet, and you get caught an’ the ‘Gamot would have your arse. Plus, you really want to come out as a wizard to a group of folks you don’t know?”

*Dammit, dammit, dammit.*

“No I’m tellin’ you all this for a few other reasons. First, I know you’ve noticed I’ve been out, and I don’t want you getting it in your head to interfere. Period. You’d maybe find out anyway, as the Head is one of a few places people are to go to if things go bad. Quisby won’t be in that night until eight, so you’ll be holding this place down. If things get hairy, people might start showing up in the stables, so I want you to be prepared for that. You and me are going to spend this weekend making healin’ potions. I ain’t no healer and neither are you, but as much as you’ve been hurt in the past, I expect you know your way around the basics.”

Harry nodded, pleased that he would actually have a possible part to play even if he wasn’t able to join the fighting. “But why come here? Why not just go St. Mungo’s?”
“Fightin’ for muggle families in the muggle world? Too easy for that to be turned into a violation of the Statue of Secrecy, even if all the fightin’ is done at someone’s house. Plus, even if what he do ain’t illegal, none of us would like to out themselves as people opposin’ Voldemort. We’ll all be wearing glamours for that as well. Injured’ll come here or one of the other safe places first, then go on if they need to with a suitable story to explain their injuries.”

Ab regarded him seriously. “I also expect not to have to tell you to keep your mouth shut about this. A lot of people are goin’ to be stickin’ their necks out for folks who got no way of fightin’ back. Tell no one, includin’ Quisby. Pel knows somethin’s up, but I’m keepin’ him outta it in case we need a solicitor. In the meantime, if you hear anyone say ‘Platform Nine,’ you haul your arse straight to me. That’s the code phrase we’re usin’ for this foolishness.”

“I will, Ab.” Harry gave the man a small half-smile. “I – er – I think it’s really great that you and other people are doing this.”

The man dismissed him with a snort. “Big damn heroes, the lot of us,” he spat sarcastically.

20 June, 1977

The next Monday morning a grumbling Harry trudged to the Hospital Wing nursing his bleeding hands. He’d been working with Hagrid again, and the younger knarls Hagrid oversaw had taken to following him around again. This time, though, Harry offered them some bread, which caused them to fly into a fury and attack him with great prejudice. Okay, so now I know. Don’t give food or anything to knarls if you don’t want to spend half an hour pulling quills out of your hands.

He had told Hagrid he was fine, but the half-giant insisted he check in with Madame Pomfrey to get bandaged up and a potion to fight off infection.

When he arrived the wing was empty of students, while Madame Pomfrey looked to be taking an inventory of her stores.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but” – Pomfrey’s eyes widened when she saw his hands – “Hagrid sent me because of these.”

The matron gave his injured hands an almost predatory glance before bustling him over to a bed. “Were you rolling in knarls, child? My goodness, you should have come straight to me!”

“I did come straight to you.”

“Well,” she harrumphed, “these’ll be tender for a while, but I can fix them well enough that by tomorrow you won’t even know it happened.” She departed for the store cupboards and came back with a few potions. “Well, drink up!”

As Harry swallowed the last of the vile concoctions, Pomfrey gave him a strange look and ushered him into her office. A flick of her want had privacy wards in place, to Harry’s astonishment. “I don’t know if you realize it, but I am, having treated you earlier in the spring, aware of, well,” she faltered, “what you are, young man.”

He looked at her, eyes clouded with suspicion. “Yeah. I am. But Ab told me that you can’t release
that information without his authorization because you took some oath, right?”

“Indeed,” she nodded gravely. “But I feel it my duty to ask you: are you certain that hiding what you are and not attending school is truly in your best interest?”

“Yes.” His answer was immediate and absolute. “I really appreciate your concern, ma’am, but sometimes … sometimes being thought nothing is a lot safer and smarter that being something.” The matron still looked disquieted. “Besides, in a way the sentence the Wizengamot gave me has kind of helped. I’m learning a lot working with Hagrid, and helping Professors Sprout and Slughorn.” He smiled. “Even if they don’t realize they’re actually teaching me. And Ab teaches me tons at home as well.”

Pomfrey didn’t smile back. Instead, she was looking at him with an oddly appraising look. Fumbling for something more to say, he didn’t notice when she drew her wand and pointed it at his left hand. “Minor Abiunge!” Suddenly a thin cut appeared across the top of his hand and a narrow trickle of blood curled down to the side of his palm.

“What the hell?! Madame Pomf –”

The matron spoke over his shocked indignation as if giving a lecture. “There are a number of healing charms that can be used on lacerations, be they minor, such as this one, or more severe. The most basic of these is Sanus Redditus. To cast the spell, one need only make a gentle wave of their wand from the farthest edge of the cut to the closest edge while intoning the incantation and keeping their flow of magic constant, like so.” She pointed her wand at Harry, who was busy gaping at her. “Sanus Redditus.” The flesh on his hand immediately knit itself back together, all evidence of the cut erased.

Pomfrey pointed her wand at her own left hand. “Minor Abiunge!” A similar thin cut appeared. She handed him her wand. “Now you, Harry.”

Shocked, Harry nonetheless grasped the foreign wand, which seemed to sulk in his hand but grew a bit warm nonetheless, and copied her had motion. “Sanus Redditus.” Both smiled when her hand was suddenly unmarred.

“This charm will only work on relatively minor wounds, however. Perhaps later we’ll work on slightly more challenging ones.” Her grin turned rather devilish. “Tell me, what do you know of healing burns?”

24 June, 1977

Harry realized he had never truly appreciated how hard it had to have been to be Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley.

It wasn’t that he’d achieved some enlightened understanding about what it was like to be a brilliant muggleborn female or to be the youngest male in a poor, pureblood family. Such things, he would have said if asked, were probably beyond him.

But today for the first time he fully empathized with them as friends who had to sit patiently and wait while someone dear to them was off doing dangerous, terrifying things. Hermione had had to wait
with an unconscious Ron while Harry went on to confront Snape—actually-Quirrell—actually-Voldemort in first year. Ron had been forced to stay behind in the caved-in corridor while Harry had gone on to the Chamber of Secrets. They’d both had to sit through how many Quidditch games when Harry deemed it advisable to nearly dive bomb straight into the earth, and had had to stay in the stands while he battled a dragon and entered a dark labyrinth filled with beasts, traps, and other horrors.

They’d had to sit and deal with the fact that they couldn’t really do anything to help their friend.

Being the person involved in life-or-death situations seemed surprisingly easier than being the person who had to wait for their loved one as they were involved in a life-or-death situation, Harry mused as he passed pints to the barflies who’d lumbered into the Head just after its opening on Hogwarts’ leaving day.

It was now half-three. In thirty minutes’ time, the Hogwarts Express would roll into Kings Cross station, and after that Ab and his cohorts would start trying to smuggle muggleborns and their families to a ship that would take them Belgium.

All day Harry had guiltily entertained the hope that word would come the headmaster had been correct and Death Eaters attacked the train en route (of course, being soundly thrashed by the forces of Dumbledore’s unknown group in Harry’s fantasy).

No such news arrived. Ab left at half two to get into position.

Now Harry hoped that the intelligence suggesting an attack today was incorrect.

Three minutes to 4.

Dalco was telling a story about how he stopped the neighbor’s kneazle from bringing him dead rodents. It seemed to involve an attempted obliviation, lots of alcohol, a miscast Incendio, and a furious Vera. He smiled vaguely and laughed when the others did.

4:45.

The families have to travel to wherever they’re meeting the wizard teams. They’re all in London, but that still takes time. Harry realized he was standing in the kitchen. He had no idea why he had come down there.

5:20.

Harry poured Mundungus a pint of Bungbarrel Spiced Mead instead of the Knotgrass Mead he’d ordered, much to the thief’s surprised delight.

5:45.

Harry was interrupted from thinking the worst by the sound of a persistent, loud chime that he knew only he could hear. Ab had keyed him into the stable wards.

Someone had just portkeyed or Apparated into the Head.

Jerked immediately out of his distracted obsessing, Harry barked at Pel to handle the bar as he nearly ran towards the door to down to the stables. He never even heard Pel’s startled “Okay, Harry…”
He thundered down the steps and burst into the stable to find a huge bear of a man, maybe in his late twenties, with a farmboy face and one arm hanging onto his shoulder by nothing but bone and a few strips of frayed, bloody flesh.

Who the hell – ?

Glamours. Ab said everyone was wearing glamours. This could be him. This could be anyone.

The man’s eyes rolled back into his head and he began to convulse. Harry stared at him dumbly.

What – what do I do? I have my wand... But even if I were to use magic, I don’t know any healing spells for something like this.

Suddenly his mind seemed to reel itself back to life. Yeah, but I’ve been hurt before enough to do something, at least.Tourniquet. Have to slow down the blood loss. Blood-Replenishing Potion. Stitching Elixer. Pain Potion.

Harry stripped off his belt and snapped over to the man to tighten it just below his soaked shoulder. The man grunted a bit, but seemed so far gone that he barely registered the application of the makeshift tourniquet. Without really even thinking Harry wandlessly summoned the three potions from their place over on a barn table – he’s so out of it he won’t notice that – and began pouring them into the man’s mouth, massaging his throat until he swallowed. Seconds later the blood slowed and the frayed flesh of his arm started trying to knit itself back together.

But there just wasn’t enough skin or muscle left for that.

He is going to die. Harry ran over to the potions that were lined up on the table. None of these can do anything more for something like this.

What can I do? Should I try to get him upstairs and Floo him to St. Mungo’s?

Feeling desperately helpless, he went back to the man, sat down, and held his hand.

Somebody who knows what to do, please get here soon, he prayed into the silence. Even the goats had paused whatever they were doing.

It seemed like hours, but couldn’t have been more than a minute or two, when the alarm chimes sounded again in Harry’s head as two women portkeyed in. He had a brief impression of a grandmother and a redhead before they dissolved their glamours and rushed to the fallen man.

Harry scampered out of their way.

One was a pretty woman in her twenties with dark hair and a kind face. “Oh Merlin, Doc! Doc! Please, can you hear me?” Tears started streaming down her face.

The other, about the same age but tall, darker-haired, and powerfully built, turned suspicious eyes on Harry. “Codeword!” she snapped.

“Oh, uh ‘Platform Nine’.”
Her hard face softened a bit. “Did you give him anything? Do anything?”

Everything was going so fast. Harry begged his mind to catch up. “Yeah, yeah – uh – I put my belt on as a tourniquet, then I gave him Blood Replenishing, Stitching, and Pain potions. I don’t know if they did anyth –”

“That’s good work.” She turned to her companion. “Guin? Guin! You and Doc had a cover story sorted, right?”

The smaller woman nodded vaguely. “Yes … it wasn’t … we didn’t think of something to cover something like this though … but I can modify it a bit.” She seemed to pull herself together. “Yeah, I can cover this.”

“Do it. Get him to Mungo’s now … and please update me when you can.”

The dark-haired woman nodded, grasped the man (Doc, Harry’s mind supplied) and Disapparated them both with a pop. Harry winced at the ward bells rang in his head at their departure.

The remaining woman sighed and ran a bloody hand through her hair as she sat back against a bale of straw. She really was quite big, easily over six feet tall, but right now she seemed to shrink as she gazed into nothingness.

Harry ran his eyes over her and noted a number of lacerations and bruises. He moved to the potions table and grabbed a Stitching Elixir, bruise salve, and a Pain potion.

“Ma’am?” he said hesitantly as he slowly approached her. She met his eyes and he held out the potions.

She blinked and accepted them. “Thanks kid.”

Neither spoke as she downed the potions and began applying the salve. But Harry was coming unraveled as every second ticked by. He finally couldn’t take it anymore.

“Please, do you know, can you tell me if Ab is okay?”

The woman looked at him in surprise, as if she had forgotten he was there, but then gave him a sharp nod. “Yeah, he is. A team or two obviously ran into trouble, but I didn’t hear that his had. I expect he’s with the families that … that made it to the boat.”

*That must mean some families didn’t make it. Christ.*

The woman was still speaking. “I’m sure he’ll be back soon.” He could tell she was trying to sound comforting, but her voice was shaking a little. “I, ah, I’m Adelis Dearborn. That … that man’s my brother Doc – I mean, Caradoc, and his wife Guin.”

“Oh! You’re a professor at Hogwarts then, right?”

She smiled a bit as she nodded. “You did well for my brother. Thank you.”

Harry bobbed his head. “I really hope that he’ll be okay, Professor.”
They lapsed into a short silence that was abruptly broken when the woman cursed. “Shit! Kid – when you found him, did he look like he did when we arrived?”

“Of course! I mean – I didn’t do that to him!

She waved her hand in irritation. “No, I know that, but his features – big, brown hair, twenties – he looked like that when you got here?”

“Well, yeah,” Harry affirmed in confusion.

The woman put her head in her hands. “Oh Merlin. His glamour must have dropped when he got hurt.” She stood and began to pace back and forth across the stable floor until she stopped abruptly and said, more to herself than Harry, “So they probably know. They know Doc was involved.” A bitter chuckle. “Well, shit.”

Both jumped when they heard a pop just outside the stable door, and Ab burst into the room. He had a few cuts and there was some blood on his robes, but otherwise he looked fine. Harry thought he might burst from the relief that suddenly coursed through him.

“Heard about Doc. Guin take him?” he asked without preamble.

Professor Dearborn nodded quickly. “We lose any more?”

“Nah. And all the families that made it are on the ship. They just pulled outta Hull a few minutes ago. Burke’ll contact us when his brother gets ‘em to Belgium.”

The young professor sighed. “Doc lost his glamour. Not sure when.” As Ab cursed, she continued “I better get back to the school in case someone from Mungo’s or the Ministry comes to notify me that he’s been hurt.”

As she left, she glanced at Harry. “Thanks again, kid.”

Ab sat down heavily. “You got questions. We’ll deal with ‘em later. Just know we got most of the families out. But not all. Doc was the worst of the injured.” He hit Harry suddenly with a cleaning spell that vanished the man’s blood from his robes. “I’m gonna rest a bit. You hold things down upstairs ‘til Quisby shows. Don’t tell anyone about this.”

“I understand … I’m really glad you’re okay, Ab.”

Ab grunted but his eyes were soft. “Off with you. Work do to an’ the job ain’t done.”

25 June, 1977

Harry didn’t see Ab the rest of the night. Quisby was hacked off when Harry informed him that Ab was under the weather – the man wasn’t keen on doing a Friday night by himself – but Harry just shrugged and observed his nine p.m. curfew anyway. When he got to the stable, Ab was gone, presumably having either retired to his bedroom or departed to meet with his contacts.

He was up with the dawn the next day to wait on the front stoop for the owl that would bring the morning’s early edition of the Prophet. Would the wizards really notice what happened yesterday?
His eyes were busy scanning the skies, so he didn’t immediately notice the trio approaching the pub.

“Morning, kid.”

Harry jerked his gaze in front of him with a start.

*, Nice constant vigilance there.*

Professor Dearborn, looking much less disheveled, smiled as she walked past him up the stairs to the pub. A very tall man with dark skin gave him a curious look but said nothing.

The third in the trio was … well Harry honestly couldn’t think of any word other than “perfect” to describe the youngish man whose eyes twinkled at him with suppressed mirth. He looked like a statue of some dark-haired, blue-eyed Greek god come to life. A Greek god clad in black trousers that were entirely too tight and a puffy black shirt with laces up the chest. Harry knew logically that in those clothes the man should have looked ridiculous but … Well, I think Hermione would probably say they make him look ‘dashing’ instead.

He gave Harry a frankly appraising glance. “Well, good morning,” he beamed a gleaming white smile and arched an eyebrow suggestively.

“Er –” *Maybe Hermione would say ‘rakish’ instead …*

The man gracefully stretched forth his hand, giving Harry a view of a polished silver knife at his waist and a silver wand holster around his forearm. “Nice to meet you. I am Caffrey Burke, Captain of *The Bachelor’s Delight* and one of the infamous Burke Brothers.” His smile grew wider. “You may have heard of us.” (*)

Although his apparent arrogance and flashy smile screamed “Gilderoy Lockheart,” the air of mischief about him gave Harry a very different impression.

“Uh – no, no I haven’t sir. But it’s nice to meet you?” *Why did I make that a question?* Harry felt his face grow warm as he shook the man’s hand.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! He’s what, fourteen, fifteen?” Dearborn scoffed. “Keep it in your pants, Caffrey. We’re here for business, not child molestation.”

Captain Burke affected a disappointed pout. “Too bad that, wouldn’t you say, green eyes?”

“How?” Harry flushed more deeply and floundered, then promptly begged the world to swallow him whole. *What the fuck am I on about?*

The bloody world was apparently ignoring him that day, and did not oblige.

The two men laughed in an amiable enough way as they went into the bar. “He’s just messing with you. Ignore that one, kid, if you want to stay sane,” smiled Professor Dearborn. “Oh, and you should probably go back to your room. A few more are coming, and they might get spooked since they don’t know you.”

Harry nodded as he watched the door swing closed behind her and tried to shake off the palpable *weirdness* that he felt after meeting Captain Burke. He waited a few beats, then hightailed it around the Head, through the stable door, then on to the kitchen. He paused and listened for several minutes
until he was sure he had placed the sound of footsteps. Yes, *they’re definitely upstairs in the hall*. The sound of their tread stopped abruptly. *Some kind of silencing spell or ward on whatever guestroom they’re in?*

Biting his lip, he figured it was worth a shot. He moved over to the small painting and whispered “Ariana? Can you hear me? Are you there? … Ariana?”

It took a good ten minutes of gentle prodding to get a very grumpy looking young portrait to stalk into the frame and give him a venomous glare.

“Oh … I forgot you aren’t a morning person, Ariana.”

She scowled and made a gesture that clearly meant *get on with it.*

“Sorry, but would you mind tuning the radio to whatever room the meeting is taking place in?”

The thundercloud on her face dissipated a bit as she grew thoughtful. A few moments later she ran out of the frame and returned a piece of parchment from the Yellow Room.

?meht no yps ot tnaw uoy wonk bA seoD

Does Ab know you want to spy on them?

“Er – well, no. No he doesn’t … But it’s not like I’m going to tell anyone what they say! I just want to know what’s going on. I can beg if you want …”

Ariana wavered and made a gesture – *Oh all right then.*

She sat in the armchair and tuned the radio until it snagged on a conversation already in progress in one of the guest rooms.

“—hardly philanthropists!” *Burke.* “We helped once, yes, but you want *The Bachelor or The Elizabeth* to help your cause again, it’s going to take gold from somewhere. We have to pay our crews, after all.”

“Understood. We do appreciate your assistance, and we’ll keep it in mind.” *Professor Dearborn.* “How about your people, Cramer?”

“At this point I think Clark would agree we’re satisfied with a mutually beneficial arrangement.” The voice that responded was feminine, breathy, and high-pitched, but there was a biting edge to it. Harry suddenly envisioned a delicate hummingbird with a razor-sharp beak. He heard another man murmur in agreement. “My friends certainly enjoyed the opportunity to do something more to help others against those shits,” the breathy voice went on. He could almost *hear* a feral smile through the radio.

*I – I think I know that voice. From where?* His mind prodded at his faint recognition like a tongue prods a loose tooth.

“Good. As for casualties,” continued Professor Dearborn, “we lost the two families who didn’t make it to the rendezvous point, and the father of one of the students in my group. There’s no evidence that the Death Eaters expected us – they seemed shocked when we pulled our wands, and the one who hit Doc got in a lucky shot. Our most immediate problem, as I already said, is that Doc’s glamour failed. Armstrong’s trying to keep an associate near his hospital room at all times, and Guin’s there.
We’ll just have to wait and see if anything comes of this.”

“Will he live?” the familiar, girlish voice – Cramer – inquired.

There was no answer, so Harry assumed the professor had nodded when he heard the voice say “Good.”

_That voice is definitely familiar … But I don’t know anyone named Cramer …_ Harry started running through every magical adult female he knew, which he soon discovered was not a terribly long list.

“Right then,” grunted Ab. “We’ll see what happens and meet in a week’s time. Here?”

A few murmured assents followed, but then a pleasant tenor interrupted. “What about your boy, Ab? Saw him outside when I arrived. Can he be trusted?”

“He’s the one who kept Doc alive long enough for the Healers to pull him through, Will,” Professor Dearborn said.

“Don’t worry about him, Armstrong,” Ab added. “Boy who knows what’s important and how to keep a secret. You can trust Harry. If you need to get a message to me and I ain’t around, he’s one you can tell.”

Harry stopped reviewing possible owners of the breathy voice long enough to enjoy a small swell of satisfaction.

“Harry?” The woman called Cramer inquired. “Harry the squib?” Ab must have nodded. “Isn’t he the one who – back in April – with Walden Macnair?”

Ab must have nodded again, because a low, impressed whistle rang through the radio. “Really? That’s the little blighter who shuffled old Macnair off the mortal coil?” Captain Burke asked.

“Yeah,” responded Dearborn, “kid seems to know what he’s about. So, you scoundrel, you best leave off trying to corrupt the poor boy!”

“Are you serious? Oh Professor, now I’m definitely interested in corrupting him!”

“Touch the boy and he’ll have to be the one doing the fucking, Burke,” Ab threatened flatly.

Cramer giggled. “From what I’ve heard, the boy can probably take care of himself just fine, Aberforth.” The woman sighed with relish. “I should see about getting him a little thank you gift. Because of him that cow Olive Hornby got sent up to Azkaban.” Her tinkling laugh turned vicious. “I just doubt the Dementors will appreciate her fashion sense.”

The others might have responded, Harry didn’t know. He vaguely registered the sounds of people getting to their feet through the radio, but something the woman said had gotten caught on a loop in his brain.

... Because of him that cow Olive Hornby ...

Olive Hornby ...

Wait. I knew that name before I came to the past, before she ever came to the Head to do the
inspection. I didn’t recognize it then though …

... Because of him that cow Olive Hornby …

... Olive Hornby …

... Because … Olive Hornby …

The voice in his mind grew clearer and fought to be known.

... Because Olive Hornby …

... Because Olive Hornby was teasing me …

... Because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses …

... I just doubt the Dementors …

... I just … Dementors …

... I just remember …

... I just remember seeing a pair …

... I just remember seeing a pair of great big yellow eyes …

... and then I died …

... If you die down there, you’re welcome to share my toilet …

Harry’s mouth hung open in shock and his mind stuttered in absolute disbelief.

No way. This can’t … She can’t … I must have misheard, I must have …

Coming to life as quickly as he had fallen into the trance of his memories, he raced up the kitchen stairs and into the public room just as Ab’s guests were coming down the stairs. His eyes flew past the Captain, the professor, a thin red-haired man, Ab, the dark-skinned man (Armstrong?, his mind idly guessed) and landed on the petite woman standing on the landing. Despite being in her late forties or so, she wore skin-tight brown pants that made even Burke’s trousers look baggy and a tattered safari vest covered in pockets. Her glossy brown hair was streaked with gray and hit her shoulders cut in a perfectly straight line. Glasses perched atop her nose, glasses whose rims were silver and stuck out a bit at the top of the frames, extending into sharp, jagged points. They gleamed with perfect polish, reminding him of surgical knives.

As she turned to look at the sudden intrusion, recognition thrummed in him like adrenaline injected straight into his bloodstream.

It’s her. My God. It’s really her.

Moaning Myrtle stood in the Hog’s Head.

A walking, talking, middle-aged, decidedly not dead Moaning Myrtle.
“Well bugger me,” Harry breathed.

The woman cocked an eyebrow his way. “What’s the matter with you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Chapter End Notes

(*) *The Bachelor’s Delight* is an actual ship that was used by explorer/buccaneer/colonialist asshole Willam Dampier. There’s not supposed to be any allusion to the character or many misdeeds of Dampier, I just thought the name was perfect.

The so-called “Burke Brothers” are actually canon, though the wiki contains no real details about them. However, they almost certainly belong to another generation and serve more as the kernel of inspiration for these characters than anything else.

As always, thanks for reading.
The Ghosts of Memories Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XV. The Ghosts of Memories Past

25 June, 1977

Harry’s hand shook as he downed a big gulp of his second glass of Ogden’s. Ab must know this is serious. He broke out the good stuff.

He distantly heard the rush of the Floo and the sound of someone wiping themselves off.

“All right, all right, I’m here, though it’s too bloody early for any civilized person to be conscious. Especially a person who was rudely woken and is in dire need of a hangover potion. As in, give me a hangover potion, you bastard,” Pel grumbled.

“Keep your panties on, here.” A chink of a glass on the counter.

Pel breathed in relief. “Oh, thank Merlin for these.”

Suddenly Ab and Pel were at his table looking at him expectantly.

“Huh?”

The others – and her – they must have left. Shouldn’t I have noticed them leaving?

“Lad! I said, you want to explain what bug is up your arse now that Pel’s here like you wanted?”

Harry took another swig of his whiskey. I asked for Pel? His mind couldn’t seem to work correctly.

“Okay. Okay. That woman … the one who was here. Myrtle.”

Ab slammed his fist down. “Hold it there, boy, she doesn’t want folks talking about what she’s up to.”

Pel laughed. “Well, if you’re talking about Myrtle Cramer, I suspect she’s up to illegal enchanting, trafficking in illegally-enchanted muggle items, and probably not a little bit of vigilantism, among many other new and exciting crimes.”

The other two males stared at him.

“What?” Pel asked innocently. “She does late-night deals in here all the time! An’ I was a solicitor, if you’ll recall. One day my money’ll run out and I’ll have to take more cases. Doesn’t hurt to know folks who might find themselves in need of legal advice at a reasonable price.”

Ab was saying something. Harry’s mind … wasn’t doing all that much.
More whiskey. More whiskey now.

Yes, that’s a fine idea.

“Lad! Would you listen?! What the fuck are you on about Myrtle Cramer for?”

“I – I knew her. I met her before. In my time.”

“So? You’ve met other people here that you knew there. Didn’t cause you to go soft in the head.”

Harry sighed shakily. “No, you don’t understand, I’m doing this all wrong …”

He paused and closed his eyes.

“Okay. Remember how I told you about the Chamber of Secrets, y’know, with the basilisk?” The older men both nodded impatiently. “And I know I mentioned that the Chamber had been opened before, in the ‘40s, by Tom Riddle – Voldemort – when he was a student. So, the last time he set the basilisk against students it killed one of them. A girl. Her name was Myrtle Warren. But see, I met her, ‘cause she became a ghost. We called her Moaning Myrtle. She lived in the girls’ loo where the entrance to the Chamber was. I talked to her a whole bunch of times in my second year, and then again last year. That woman – the one you call Cramer – she’s definitely Moaning Myrtle. Only she grew up. She … she should be dead. Dead as a teenager, not some middle-aged, not dead woman!”

He was breathing too fast. He took a swig of his whiskey only to realize that Ab, the bastard, had switched his glass for one with water.

Pel and Ab stared at him.

The former solicitor roused himself first. “But, Harry,” he said gently, “no students died when the Chamber of Secrets was opened in the ‘40s. I remember it well – several got petrified, but then the attacks stopped. Rumor was that’s the reason poor Hagrid was expelled, that he’d been keeping the beast that was responsible.”

Ab nodded. “Weren’t any deaths, lad. I’d not have forgotten somethin’ like that.”

Harry felt like he was going insane. “But there was one! I know there was! I saw it all in Tom Riddle’s diary, and I know Myrtle. Hell, she even got in a bubble bath with me last year!”

Pel’s eyes widened. “Well done there, lad. Didn’t think you had it in you!”

Harry sputtered. “Oh for – she’s a ghost! It was creepy, really. Anyway, I know it’s her. She even hates Olive Hornby just like her ghost did! And her name was Warren before, right? Did she get married or something?

A curt nod from Aberforth.

This just doesn’t make any sense. I know Moaning Myrtle! I remember her. I’m not crazy!
The concerned looks from Ab and Pel made Harry realize he’d said that all out loud.

Ab made a helpless gesture. “I don’t know what to tell you lad. You remember one thing, Pel and me know the truth is different. No one died in the Chamber of Secrets fiasco. Myrtle Warren married some bloke. Grew up. Didn’t die as a teenager. It’s just facts, Harry.”

Pel, however, suddenly sat very still, his hand over his mouth and his eyes very wide.

“What is it Pel?”

“ … Maybe it’s not …”

“Not what?” Ab barked impatiently.

The old solicitor shook his head as if to clear it. “Maybe … maybe they aren’t facts. Not really. Or maybe they’re definitely facts.” Both Harry and Ab made to press him but Pel waved them to silence. “Give me a moment.” His eyes looked off into the distance. “All right. What do we know? We know that Myrtle Warren lived through Hogwarts and grew up, got married. No one died in the Chamber. We also know –” he glared at Harry as the young man reared up indignantly “ – we also know that Myrtle Warren was killed by a basilisk when the Chamber was opened and became a Hogwarts ghost. Agreed?”

The other two nodded, both looking thoroughly confused.

“We’re also agreed, generally speaking, that Harry isn’t insane.”

“Damn right,” the boy in question muttered while Ab snorted. “Where’re you goin’ with this? Spit it out, for fuck’s sake.”

“I –” Pel paused and then nodded to himself. “I think we’re all correct. All our facts are accurate. Both versions are true. So there’s only one explanation, so far as I can see.” He turned to Harry and licked his lips nervously. “How do you know you time travelled?”

“I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Pel sighed. “Think, Harry, how much of what happened in the 1970s did you actually know before you came back here?”

Harry frowned and slowly began constructing a list. “Well, Voldemort was on the rise. My parents were at school. I know Dumbledore was headmaster, and that McGonagall, Sprout, oh – and Flitwick taught them… I know that Hagrid was the groundskeeper because he got expelled for the
Chamber of Secrets … Mad-Eye Moody was an Auror during the war … Frank and Alice Longbottom got together at some point … um, some people became Death Eaters … Barty Crouch worked in the DMLE …”

“Keep going,” Pel urged.

“Er – the Whomping Willow got planted … my dad’s group of friends were called the Marauders and they, well they did a lot of cool things with magic … there were acromantula in the Forest … Filch worked at Hogwarts … Pomfrey too … Oh, and the Weasleys started having kids! Bill, Charlie, and Percy so far, the twins can’t have been born yet … I don’t, I don’t think I know any more.”

Pel smiled grimly. “How much do you really know, then?” At Harry’s confused look, he went on. “Can you list every student at Hogwarts in 1977? Can you list every offensive Voldemort took in the ‘70s? Can you list any offensive action Voldemort took in the ‘70s that you didn’t learn about here? Do you remember the precise details of any of them at all? Do you know the name of every Auror, or Ministry worker? What Ab and I were doing in ’77, again, apart from knowledge you got after the Kiss? Any of that?”

“No!” Harry cried, frustrated. “Of course I didn’t know that stuff! Hell, I still don’t know most of it. I only know little bits and pieces, most of it really general, okay? Look, I know I should have paid more attention to the history of Voldemort’s first rise – I could probably be way more helpful but –”

Pel shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. Before you came back, you knew as much about the decade before you were born as I know about the decade before I was born. Which is precisely my point.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said miserably.

“I think I may.” Ab’s voice was grave and incredulous at the same time. “I think I may at that.” He cleared his throat. “What Pel’s tryin’ to get at is that you don’t know enough, enough details, about the time you landed in to know if it’s any different than what your 1970s were, yeah Pel?”

Pel nodded. “Sure, many things are the same, most of them that we know of have to do with Hogwarts, the Potters, and their friends, but it’s not like you, Harry, can look at a newspaper and say ‘wait, that didn’t happen!’ If you hadn’t met Cramer, you might not have even noticed the differences. And I bet there are differences. Likely a lot of them, though given how similar things seem to be, most can’t be too drastic.”

Harry shook his head. “Please, spit out whatever you’re trying to say, I just don’t get it.”

Ab and Pel shared a glance. “Lad,” Ab sighed, “Pel’s suggestin’ that you didn’t just time travel. He’s thinkin’ that, well, this ain’t even your world in the first place. That whatever that Kiss was, sent you to a, a what –?”

“Parallel universe,” supplied Peloother.

“Aye, a parallel universe. A world so like your own that you didn’t even notice it wasn’t the same one. You just figured anythin’ you didn’t know about or understand was because you were in the past.”

Pel laughed without humor. “Technically, you may not have even time travelled. In our universe
time might move at a different speed than in yours. You may have woken up on the real day after your Kiss, we just move nineteen years more slowly.”

Harry stared at them.

“Augustus Rookwood!” Ab suddenly shouted into the silence.

Numb, Harry could only say “Huh?”

Pel gasped. “That’s why there wasn’t any record of him!” The old solicitor’s eyes blazed with excitement. “Harry, you said that Augustus Rookwood was a Death Eater who infiltrated the Department of Mysteries, but we haven’t been able to find even a trace of any Rookwood since the last known one died the 1920s.”

“It’s ‘cause he doesn’t exist in our world,” Ab concluded. “Maybe his ancestor didn’t die off in yours, and thus he existed, but the man just isn’t here.”

Pel nodded emphatically. “Honestly, now that I think about it, if the Dark Lord had a person already in place in the Department of Mysteries, why in the world would Macnair and the others have had to kidnap me in the first place? This Rookwood would know far more than I do, certainly.” He paused and looked at Harry, compassion in his eyes. “Oh Harry, this is the only explanation I can think of to account for Myrtle’s existence here, and her death in, well, your world.”

Harry could barely find the breath for words. “So, so, I’m in a different universe?” The men nodded silently. “I – I – I seriously don’t know how to handle this.”

Ab gave him his tumbler of whiskey back and Harry slurped it down desperately.

*Nope, that didn’t help. Still apparently in* another fucking universe!

His hands were shaking and they wouldn’t stop.

Suddenly he knew he had to get out of there. Now. *Right goddamn now!*

So Harry ran. He had intended to dart through the stable door and out into the world, to the Forest maybe, but found himself instead only making it to his hay bed

*I’ll never see Hermione and Ron or Sirius again. Not really.*

*Oh fuck. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.*

“Harry?”

“Lad?”

The two older men were in the doorway.

Harry only shook his head as he struggled to find words. “Things just won’t stop happening. I – I’m just … I’m tired,” he finally confessed.

Ab crouched down and handed him a glass of water. “Aye, lad, I ‘spect you are, at that.”
“I’ll never really see my friends again.” The admission felt like knives in his throat. “I mean, I was getting used to not getting to see them until I’m a grownup and they’re little kids, but … now it won’t really be them.” He couldn’t seem to raise his voice louder than a jagged whisper. “It’ll be other thems.”

There wasn’t much either man could say to that. After a few minutes they gave him some privacy and he tried to put himself back together. No thoughts buzzed in his head, and his emotions seemed to have fallen asleep.

Eventually he realized he couldn’t stay moaning about his fate in the stable forever, so he slowly returned to the pub. Ab and Pel were in quiet conversation at the table.

“Harry,” Pel hesitated, “I can’t imagine, well, what this must be like. But we did think of something positive in this whole mess.”

The boy looked at him blearily.

“You’re free.” Pelother said. “I mean, you’ve been so scared of changing the timeline. You don’t need to be scared of that anymore. Your actions can’t cause you or anyone to else to wink out of existence, because this isn’t your past. If your mother an’ father don’t get married an’ have you, you’ll still exist. If for some reason your friend Ron’s parents don’t have him, or give birth to a different child a day earlier than his birthday, that’s not on you. Meanwhile, I expect your friend will continue to exist in his universe. This is truly a different world, Harry, so different things will happen. Of course, there’s consequences to your actions like there are to all of ours, but your responsibilities are no different than any other person’s now.”

Ab sighed. “I know you were worried about killin’ Macnair, about how you could have memories of him, but him dying in 1977. The Macnair on your world didn’t meet you in the ’70s. He lived. This Macnair died. Pel’s crazy theory explains why that could be without the universe unraveling. Because it doesn’t matter to this universe any more than any other action.” He sighed even more heavily. “Course this means that we can’t rely on your knowledge of this war to help us. Same things may happen, but others just as well may not.”

Harry barely registered Ab’s comments.

I’m free. The words felt funny on his tongue. I’m free. Things happen. They won’t be all my fault.

Harry nodded mutely. I’m free. The thought was beyond disconcerting. He’d spent so many months, nearly a year now, being terrified and pummeling his mind with worry, that he couldn’t quite wrap his head around his new-found liberty yet.

As most of his mind poked at the strangeness of not having the power to eradicate the space-time continuum, he found himself voicing a thought that he hadn’t even realized he was having, the words slurring out of him unbidden.

“Gaspard Shingleton and Aeris Potage.”

“Wha –” “I don’t understa –” Both men were caught wrong-footed as the conversation seemed to take a sharp turn.

Harry roused the majority of his mind out of its stupor. “Gaspard Shingleton and Aeris Potage, remember? They both died in the Hayle Massacre back in February? When I saw their names in the
I freaked out because I knew that they hadn’t died then … in my world, I guess. Singleton invented a self-stirring cauldron in ’83, and I remembered it clearly because I got it right on an exam … I – I thought I’d somehow done something that changed the timeline and led to their deaths, but I couldn’t figure anything I could have done to make that happen but … so it really wasn’t me, then, huh?”

Ab and Pel both were nodding. “That sounds about the right of it, my friend,” said Pel with a small, encouraging smile.

“So … I’m free.” He tasted the words on his tongue as he said them aloud for the first time. Shaking his head in surrender, he let out a hollow, disbelieving laugh. “I … guess that bit’s good then.”

The three men sat quietly for some time, drinking their drinks and thinking long thoughts.

“Wait,” Harry burst out suddenly. “Were you guys saying that Moaning Myrtle is some, what? Vigilante enchantress or something here?”

Ab nodded. “That’s ain’t off the mark, I s’pose. Lady’s got a lot of fingers in a lot of pies.”

The younger wizard tried to assimilate that information with his impression of his Moaning Myrtle. “That’s just so, so… not what I’d expect. Her ghost in my world was always really sensitive and girly. She was pretty annoying, to be honest.”

Ab snorted. “Well, I expect most of us thank Merlin we don’t have to grow up to be the people we were when we were teenagers. Don’t know about her as a kid, but now Myrtle Cramer ain’t one to cross.”

“Can’t see her as the whinging type, myself,” Pel added.

Harry shook his head. “Weird.”

They slipped back into silence, each lost in his own reflections.

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29 June, 1977

Hogwarts’s Professor Found Murdered!

—Mallard Dowling—

Sources at the DMLE have just revealed that they have identified the body of a witch found yesterday in a wizarding neighborhood of Manchester as that of Hogwarts Muggle Studies professor Adelis Dearborn, aged 29.

Although the cause and circumstances of Professor Dearborn’s death have not been officially released, according to one Auror, who wished to remain anonymous, “it is hardly idle speculation to say she was murdered, as her body was discovered magically attached to her front door and disemboweled.”

Rumors that attribute her demise to Death Eater activity are thus far officially unsubstantiated.
Professor Dearborn was an instructor at Hogwarts for two years. Colleague Pomona Sprout of the Herbology department describes her as a “principled woman who cared deeply for her students.” Filius Flitwick, longtime Charms professor, notes that “despite growing up immersed in pureblood culture, she took her subject seriously and spent many years living and working in the Muggle world so as to become fully experienced in her subject.”

Professor Dearborn is survived by her younger brother Caradoc Dearborn, of the Department of Magical Transportation, and his wife Guinier, as well as several cousins and other extended family. Funeral arrangements are on hold pending the conclusion of the DMLE’s investigation.

Harry stared at the morning edition of the paper, not sure how to feel. There had been no mention in the Prophet of Doc Dearborn’s injuries, which he knew was a good thing, since it meant whatever cover story he and his wife had used had probably been successful.

Yet there also hadn’t been any report in the newspaper of the murdered muggleborns and their families. Entire families hadn’t made it. That should merit some notice, his mind insisted.

On the other hand, the more rational part of himself argued, maybe they were deemed muggle crimes only, so the wizarding world didn’t even notice. This could be a good thing, it urged, it means that the others all got away and probably no other wizards attacked them, right?

For three days Harry and Ab had thought that the attack on the muggleborn families had escaped the British wizarding world’s notice, and thus that their little coalition wasn’t on anyone’s radar. “Maybe Doc’s glamour failed mid-Portkey,” Ab would wonder.

Apparently they were wrong.

Harry had only met Adelis Dearborn twice, both times quite briefly, but … but he had liked her. He liked that she fought, and that she helped the muggleborns, and that she seemed kind and competent.

But now she was dead. Stuck to her own front door and disembow — don’t think about that.

She smiled at me just the other day. Thanked me for helping with Doc. And … she’s just … gone, without any warning at all.

The others would be scared, Harry knew. Obviously the Death Eaters had seen Doc, and as he was still in St. Mungo’s, they’d gone after his sister. Did they know the professor was involved in the smuggling of the families? Did they bother to try to torture information out of her? Had she been forced to tell them with whom her brother had been working?

I suppose we’ll find out soon enough, Harry though grimly, if and when the Death Eaters start making more house calls.

And then, of course, came the type of thought that had been plaguing him constantly since he’d realized the true effects of the Dementor’s Kiss, that crept into his brain whenever anything happened.

I wonder if she’s still alive in my world.

He sighed and picked at his jumper.

There’s no point in thinking like this. This is my world now, period. It’s doesn’t matter if she lived
back home or back there or whatever. The Adelis Dearborn I met – the only one I know or will probably ever know – is dead.

25 July, 1977

Despite their fears that those who had helped smuggle the muggleborn to Belgium might have been ousted by Professor Dearborn, no reprisals were visited upon any of the other participants, Ab told Harry. It seemed that the Death Eaters knew Doc Dearborn had been involved, but didn’t suspect the professor (ruddy morons, Ab had grumbled, almost as if disappointed in their enemy) and that her death had probably been intended to punish her brother.

Doc had eventually been released from St. Mungo’s, minus one arm, and had moved into a better-protected home with his wife, though he still continued to go to work. Guin had taken to dropping off freshly-baked biscuits and pastries every so often at the pub in gratitude for Harry’s help. After the second time she woke a very grumpy Ab by stopping by quite early – long before any self-respecting bartender should be up and about – she had taken to leaving them wrapped with a small bow on the porch. Harry was rather embarrassed by her insistent appreciation, but Ab and the barflies were quite enthusiastic about the delicious rewards.

As he walked upstairs in the castle for the last part in yet another day of ‘service to wizards,’ Harry dwelt, as usual at this point, on the best way to move forward in this world. He couldn’t count on Voldemort coming after his parents, Alice, and Frank like he had, nor could he be sure that Peter Pettigrew was destined to turn traitor. It was beyond comforting to know that he truly had the freedom to act to save them should things play out the same way but, as Ab had said before the Platform Nine operation, Harry knew that he certainly wasn’t ready to actually fight in a war. He was much better than he had been in the graveyard, but he couldn’t bring himself to really believe he’d improved enough.

Just keep learning from Ab. Practice. Pay attention when lessons at Hogwarts start up again. Pass my O.W.L.s. Just get better!

And don’t think about home. There’s nothing for that. I have a life here, and I’m free.

That bit last had become an oft-repeated mantra. Harry didn’t want to imagine how he would have felt if he didn’t have Ab, and Pel, and the Head.

I’ve lost one home, but I’ve gotten another. It could be so much worse. I have a real life here, and I’m free.

He had actually looking forward to working at the school this morning. With the students and most of the professors gone, he had spent most of the summer hanging out with Hagrid and learning more – sometimes more than he ever wanted to know – about how to care for magical creatures. He shuddered as he remembered helping the half-giant deliver Umbra of a new brother for Colin the thestral. Sometimes hands-on learning was entirely too hands-on. He never wanted to be elbow deep in … that ever again, though the now nearly fully-grown Colin had been ecstatic that his friend participated in bringing his new sibling into the world.

When not with Hagrid, Harry was usually with Madame Pomfrey. Professor Sprout, who was away for the summer months, had tasked him with the upkeep of all her non-magical and non-threatening
plants, while the professor had asked Pomfrey to care for those plants which required spells to manage. Together the two would spend hours in the greenhouses, with Pomfrey teaching Harry both how to manage the more dangerous plants and all about the various magical properties of each specimen. In a given day they might work on material related to Herbology, Potions, Charms, Defense, sometimes even Transfiguration, all of which Harry hoped would prove useful on his upcoming exams and, more importantly, in the war.

At one point Harry’s curiosity had demanded to be satisfied.

“Madame Pomfrey,” he began, as she finished warding off a particularly frisky Venomous Tentacula, “why are you helping me? I mean, I know why you aren’t telling people my secrets, but why bother teaching me all this stuff?”

The matron had paused for a few moments. “Well, Harry, I suppose I don’t rightly know why. You should know things, I know them, so teaching you it just seems natural enough.” She stood back on her heels thoughtfully. “Though I suppose I do get rather lonely and bored in the Hospital Wing all day. My only long-term guests tend to either be unconscious, asleep, or prone to a deplorable amount of whining. Not the best conversationalists, you can imagine. In the summer I see people even less.” She smiled at him as he snickered at her description of her student charges. “It is a nice change to work with someone else, especially someone likeable. And of course, someone not bleeding, swelling, or snuffling.”

Harry had laughed, but later reflected as he walked home that it was a very strange thing to hang out with adults he had known in his former life. As a Hogwarts student, he’d never thought to actually get to know any of the faculty or staff. A thick invisible line had separated the “adults” from the “students.” The latter were potential friends, the former just authorities. Now, however, all his friends were adults but for Ariana (who didn’t quite count as a kid either), and Madame Pomfrey was fast approaching joining that group. He couldn’t imagine his “original” matron ever confessing to him that she was often lonely at Hogwarts, yet here she was, speaking to him of her actual feelings, like he was … just a regular person.

It was all rather nice, he had concluded.

Today he was again slated to work his last hour and a half with Madame Pomfrey once again, after he having care of the greenhouses that morning. She had been asked by St. Mungo’s to brew some more difficult healing potions in bulk, and she had invited him to help her starting today. It would, Ab agreed, be invaluable training for the looming war.

As he approached the Hospital Wing, he noticed its doors were open and a cultured male voice was booming loud enough for him to clearly overhear every word.

“—believe you boys would be so reckless! I had to pull several strings just to get Jackson to track down those officers or whatever they’re called to Obliviate them! I’m still not even sure we Obliviated the right men! What did you think you were doing?!” (*)

Harry nearly bit his tongue when he heard a young Sirius responding. “Honestly, Mr. P., it was an accident! We didn’t expect to be set upon by Death Eaters!”

What?!

The man harrumphed. “Well, I’m sure you didn’t, but that doesn’t explain why you had been stopped by muggle officers – Jackson said that the men planned to arrest you both!”
An exhausted sounding James began to respond. “Well, Dad, we may have been going a little fast on Sirius’ bike …”

“No one told me there were even Muggle laws against that! I swear!,” Sirius added.

“And would you care to explain why a trio of Death Eaters on broomsticks just happened to find you?”

“Bad luck?” Harry grimaced. Sirius was a terrible liar.

Apparently Mr. Potter felt the same way. He gave a disbelieving laugh and then sighed. “Well the fact that you both broke the International Statue of Secrecy can’t be debated. Really, levitating one of those muggle vehicles into flying Death Eaters in full view of muggles – muggles in law enforcement no less, and then just leaving them there!”

James went from sounding tired to sounding scared. “But … but you can get us out of any trouble, right Dad?”

“Yes, yes, of course I can. I’ve already had to make a few donations to keep you two out of having an informal hearing with Barty Crouch, and I expect I’ll have to call in even more favors to make this go away completely.” The man paused. “Stupid mess, this is! Don’t think you two are going to get out of some punishment!”

Harry wanted to snort. Sure, I save my own life and someone else’s after being kidnapped, and Potter’s voting to convict me to a lifetime in Azkaban; these two break the most important law in the wizarding world and he’s going to make it all just go away.

“No broomsticks for the rest of the summer, and no motorcycle either.”

An eruption of protests followed, but the man cut it off.

“And I’ll be telling your mother.”

“Well shit,” James muttered. “Now we are done for.”

Harry heard one of the people move a bit in the room, and then Mr. Potter spoke again, this time his tone much softer. “I am glad that you weren’t really injured Sirius, and that your injuries aren’t … aren’t as bad as they could have been, son. Or as bad as they really should have been. I’m just …” the man broke off for several moments before finally bursting out, “Merlin, fighting Dark Wizards at seventeen!” Mr. Potter sounded at once flabbergasted, angry, and more than a bit proud before composing himself “I’m off to the Ministry to get this worked out. You two stay here until the matron releases you, James.”

The rush of an activated Floo followed.

“Oh, come on, Padfoot,” he heard his father (the dimensional counterpart of my father, Harry’s mind corrected) say after a few moments. “Mum’ll just yell a lot and make us work with the house-elf for a few days. She won’t actually do anything or make you leave. You know that.”

“Yeah, ‘course. Okay.” Sirius sounded morose and entirely unconvincing.
“She won’t.” There was a long pause before James made an annoyed sound. “Fine, mate. If you want to start obsessing, I’m taking a nap.”

Silence fell. Harry lingered in the corridor for a few minutes, unsure of what to do. Pomfrey was expecting him, but it didn’t sound like she was in there, and he was reluctant to speak with his father or godfather when something was obviously going on (the dimensional counterparts of my father and godfather, his inner voice corrected yet again).

Before he could come to a decision Harry heard the Floo again, and the sound of more than one person entering the ward. “Oh, well done you two!” a male’s voice said, dripping with sarcasm. *I know that voice.*

“Sure, let’s hit these wizards with a police car, great idea!” a female voice mocked. *Wait – that’s Auror Alice! And the man has to be Frank Longbottom.*

*What in the world are they doing here?* Harry supposed it made sense that Longbottom would know them, though he must have been an upper year when they started Hogwarts …

“And you both were wearing those stupid Order shirts you made? *Seriously?*” Frank seemed quite angry now. “Why don’t you take an ad out in the Prophet: ‘Hey everyone, we’re members of a totally secret society?!’”

“And this is why I told Dumbledore not to let kids into the Order! Ruddy untrained, unthinking idiots, the both of you! Hardly ready for a war!” The voice was much older and far more caustic than the others. *That’s … yeah that sounds like Mad-Eye Moody!* “You’re bloody lucky you only got hit with a Bone-Breaker and a glance of Cruciatius, Potter. By rights we should be scraping pieces of you both off the streets.”

*What?!* Harry realized he was breathing very fast.

*Calm down. They’re okay. They’re okay. They’re fine.*

Alice started to say something, but Moody shushed her.

A warning from Harry’s instincts hushed his swelling concern for his dad and his godfa – for James and Sirius.

*Why’s it so quiet all of a sudden?*

No sooner had Harry thought this then Sirius unexpectedly, and quite loudly, broke into a story of their battle. Apparently the two had been watching some house, then decided to speed home on his motorcycle after they were done, at which point the Muggle police pulled them over. At that point, three Death Eaters on broomsticks arriv –

*Wait, what was that?* Harry caught a slight flurry of movement just behind him out of the corner of his eye. He hadn’t even fully turned around before he –

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It had been a nice enough day, Harry supposed as he walked slowly back to the Head from Hogwarts. *Bit boring, though.* He’d been assigned to cleaning out old classrooms, yet found he
hadn’t really minded sweeping, mopping, and scrubbing for nearly five hours straight. *Feels good, I guess, to have gotten some hard work done.*

It was a Monday, so the pub didn’t open until the early evening because of non-existent lunch and afternoon business. When Harry got home, Ab gave him a wicked grin.

“Let’s do some duelin’, shall we lad? See if you can keep off your arse for at least five minutes this time?”

Harry grinned back as the two left the Head and headed deep into the Forest where they’d found an ideal practice ground. Ab took up position in the north side of the glade while Harry chose a defensible spot in the south and fetched his wand from his mokeskin bag. The second the familiar holly rested in his palm, Harry felt a sudden jerk in his mind, not unlike the hook-in-the-navel feeling of a Portkey. Without warning, he seemed to be back at Hogwarts, watching himself – another Harry – going through the entire morning in the greenhouses all over again.

*What the fuck is happening?!!*

No matter what he did, the other him just kept at pruning, re-potting, and watering Sprout’s plants for hours. What was even worse, Harry found himself completely unable to leave the room, as though some invisible cage held him captive near what seemed to be his past self.

Finally, after what had to have been several hours, the other him packed up his supplies and then departed. Harry followed close on his heels as he slowly made his way to the Hospital Wing.

With wide eyes he watched himself listening to conversations first between James, Sirius, and his dimensional grandfather, then the two teenagers, Alice, Frank, and Mad-Eye Moody, of all people.

He caught sight of the same flurry of movement at the same time as his other self did. While the other Harry was hit by a silently-cast stunner before he could glimpse his attacker, “real” Harry got a full view.

*Albus Dumbledore?*

Dumbledore had stunned him in the back.

*What the hell is going on!?*

As soon as the spell impacted his memory counterpart, the world around Harry himself dissolved into a muted, cloudy gray.

After a few panicked breaths, he reined in his concern and cautiously began exploring the haze.

*Nothing here. Nothing here at all. What the hell is going on?*

*I think … I think I must be unconscious from the Stupefy, but still alert enough to form something of a memory. A memory of nothing, but a memory.*

It was impossible to keep track of time in the gray cloud, but it felt like it must have been nearly an hour, he reckoned, when he realized that he was slowly able to discern strange, barely-heard sounds that were gradually but consistently becoming more audible.
Wait … those are voices!

Harry shut his eyes and concentrated on the almost comforting susurroration of low voices.

“… Dock deer born hsnt shoynd oldmoor haz ee sur?”

“no … dad woodnot splain demerderov profssr deer born. Ima frayed ime attaloss.”

Yeah, I must be coming out of it. I’m – the other me, that is – isn’t quite conscious yet, but I’m not unconscious either…

Shit, pay attention! They’re still talking.

“…diots mess. Andeel with tha won.” The strange distortion of the voices was lifting enough for Harry to recognize Mad-Eye Moody’s voice. “Wanta use Lejilleh men see or veritasirum to see whatee nose Albus?”

Fuck. I have no idea what that first bit meant, but he’s got to be asking if they want to use ‘Veritaserum to see what he knows.’ Oh fuck. Harry could feel his heart in his throat as the voices became clearer and clearer. They were still strange and dream-like, but finally discernible.

“Sir eyedohn think thas wry. We need warrens for eitheran they’re bof invasive,” a woman’s voice responded. “Harry probably jus came by accident!”

Yes! Thank you Alice!

“I agree.” Harry sagged in relief. That decisive voice had to be Dumbledore’s, and the distortion was lifting so quickly that it was nearly gone. “Based on all of Mr. Fletcher’s reports concerning him, as well as his own status, of course, Harry is hardly one we can suspect of Death Eater sympathies and is undeserving of such intrusions. His devotion to my brother is not in question. Fletcher is quite sure. Dumbledore sighed. “Nevertheless, the fact that he overheard sensitive information is concerning. Had you and your marvelous eye not been here, Alastor, I fear what else he may have heard.”

Oh, crap. Moody can see through walls … Dammit – that’s why they all went quiet and then Sirius started prattling on. Moody must have seen me and used Sirius as a distraction until Dumbledore got here! He chafed at the thought he’d been duped.

“Whaboutbliviashun?” A far more distorted voice chimed in, sounding farther way.

A man closer to him responded. “Can’t Obliviate a non-muggle without authorization, and the obliviator has to be licensed. Too easy to cause major issues if the spell goes wrong.” That has to be Frank.

Once again, a voice from farther away, and far too distorted to make out at all, entered the conversation.

“Again, I agree,” he heard Dumbledore say. “While I admit I am unlicensed, I believe I can manage the procedure well enough.”

What? Procedure?! What – don’t you dare!
“Sir? I mean, are you sure? It just doesn’t seem right –” Alice hesitated.

“Miss Fawley, you understand the situation as well as I do. Can you offer a viable alternative?” Alice fell silent.

“Very well then. Alastor, revive him on my mark, and I shall cast the spell. Please be exceptionally gentle with him – I barely powered the Stupefy lest I injure the poor boy. The rest of you, observe silence.”

“Now, Alastor.”

“Renervate!”

Memory Harry’s eyes must have opened as the world around Harry burst into clarity and color so quickly that he almost lost his balance. His memory self was on a bed in the Hospital Wing, around which were clustered Alice, Frank, Mad-Eye Moody, and Dumbledore, who had his wand pointed directly at Other Harry’s head. James and Sirius looked on from beds across the aisle.

“NO!” Harry shouted in vain.

“Obliviate.”

Dumbledore started to speak as the eyes of Harry’s past self became glassy and unfocused. “Today you arrived at Hogwarts and were asked to tidy up a number of unused classrooms. It was hard work, sweeping and mopping and scrubbing, but you are pleased with a job well done. You did not come anywhere near the Hospital Wing, and you spoke to no one other than the house elf that gave you your orders.”

Other Harry nodded absently slowly stood to make his way to the door, completely oblivious to everyone else in the infirmary.

“No fucking way!” Harry cursed.

“By the time he’s halfway to the main doors of the school, he will be acting normally, have no fear,” Dumbledore assured the others.

“What the hell is going on here!?” Pomfrey thundered from the doorway on the other side of the ward.

If it weren’t for the circumstances, it would have been funny to see all of them jump in shock.

“Ah, Madame Pomfrey, we were just –”

“Obliviating a harmless young man who was coming here because I asked him to! What was that for, Headmaster Dumbledore?”

No one seemed to pay any heed to Other Harry as he slowly walked towards the doorway with a hesitant, unsteady gait.

Dumbledore cast his eyes down in regret. “A necessary precaution, Poppy. Young Harry overheard something that, ah, could cause a great deal of harm to brave witches and wizards. I assure you, all
we did was remove a single memory and send him on his way. These Aurors,” he gestured at Moody, Alice, and Longbottom, “oversaw the whole thing.”

“Headmaster, I must protest –”

But Harry couldn’t hear the rest of the conversation. Instead, in much the same way as happens in a pensieve, he was forced to follow his other self down through Hogwarts, watching as Other Harry’s pace became more steady and his eyes less clouded. They were halfway home when the entire scene winked out and Harry was suddenly back in the Forest.

*Holy fucking … Dumbledore Obliviated me!*

It seemed no time at all had really passed, for Ab was still getting ready to cast at him from across the glade. “No, stop Ab, stop! Get over here!”

The man ran up, brow furrowed. Before he could speak, Harry gasped out, “Your brother! He – shit he *Obliviated* me today! I just grabbed my wand and I was at the school –”

Ab’s face turned truly terrible. “Put a charm on your wand some time back that restores Obliviated memories. Told you about the one on my wand, yeah?”

Harry nodded absently.

“Sit down and tell me everythin’ you saw.”

“And that’s it. That’s what I heard and saw.”

Ab’s jaw was working furiously, but he said nothing.

“Um, Ab, what’s the Order? Why’s it so important that they would … do that to me?”

The bartender shook his head and spat on the forest floor. “Oh that,” he said as if it were just a trifling thing. “The Order of the Phoenix. My brother’s secret society.” Harry’s eyes widened. “It was created to stop Voldemort. Member are Aurors, interested civilians, and, apparently, braindead teenagers.”

“The ones you called ‘ruddy lobcocks,’ yeah? The ones who wanted to protect the train.”

Ab nodded. “Order of the Phoenix. Pretentious, self-aggrandizin’ name if I ever heard one.”

*Oh.*

*I thought it sounded kind of cool.*

“Honestly, they ain’t doin’ much of anythin’ lately. Sure, they’ve fought a few small fights, but nothing big yet, though their hearts are in the right place and most know what they’re about in tough spots. Right now they mostly just gather information to hand off to Albus. Then he decides whether or not to tell anyone else. Hell, Doc Dearborn used to be a member but resigned after the Hogwarts Express fiasco. Guess it didn’t sit right with him that the Order was followin’ the Ministry’s line
about not informing the muggleborns’ families of much.”

Harry frowned. “It – I’m pretty sure my dad and Sirius are in it. They got hurt in a fight with Death Eaters. James got hit with Crucio.”

“Don’t know what the fuck he’s thinkin’ getting bloody kids involved.” Ab cursed under his breath. “They aren’t even graduated yet! But no, for my brother there ain’t no problem or conflict of interest involved in bein’ a teenager’s headmaster and the general that sends him off to war.”

Harry … didn’t really want to think about that. Maybe. But if I were still back in my first universe, I’d be begging Dumbledore to let me fight with that sort of group. He moved to a less personal topic. “Ab, what about Dung? He said that Dung’s been giving him reports or something.”

Harry could actually feel the man’s magic snapping like a wild dog trying to break through a muzzle. “Mundungus Fletcher,” Ab growled, “is a member of the Order. Reports on what the ‘seedy underbelly’ are sayin’. And apparently, reports on me and mine!” His magic crackled like an exclamation point.

“Sometimes I forget that Ab is … well, Dumbledore’s brother, and no slouch in the power department. Shite.”

“That sit well with you, lad?” As the boy shook his head emphatically, Ab made a face that was far too vicious for anyone to ever call a smile. “Now on, Dung’s blacklisted. I’ll catch him out informin’ on us to my brother as soon as I can and let him know that he’s dead to the Head. I don’t want any of them to know that the Obliviation didn’t stick.”

Harry really didn’t want to prod, he really didn’t. But …

“Ab? Are … are you a member of the Order?”

The old man laughed. “‘A course I am! My brother couldn’t get on without his spies, and I’m the best of ‘em. So yeah, I’m technically a member.” He smiled. “And I’m gonna remain a member. Best way to get information I can put to real use.”

Harry frowned, and Ab continued. “The others, the ones that helped the muggleborn … things like that might be needed in the future. I ain’t much interested in glorious battles and renown, but I appreciate that those folks don’t hold will with delusions of grandeur and aim to just get the bloody job done. Me stayin’ in the Order might help us.”

“Wait – won’t the Death Eaters know that you’re the headmaster’s brother after the whole thing with Macnair? Isn’t your cover blown?”

Ab laughed. “Nah, doesn’t seem to have been. My name was never mentioned in the papers, and only those who oppose Voldemort showed up for your trial. Sure, he might find out, I s’ppose, but I ain’t seen sign of it yet.”

They lapsed into a contemplative silence.

Ab looked at him searchingly and gave a great sigh. “What about your Auror friend, the girl? She didn’t stop ‘em in the end.”

“No, no she didn’t,” Harry admitted. “I mean, she did defend me, and she didn’t want to let Moody
do that other stuff to me, thank God, but she didn’t stop the Obliviation, even though she knew at least that it should be specialist who did it.”

“How’s that strike you?”

Harry glared at his hands, his emotions bubbling. “Dunno … I guess … yeah, I’m mad at her. Really damn mad. I mean, she probably thought she was doing the right thing for the war, and I get that, I do. But … well, I guess we aren’t really friends like I thought.”

Ab raised an eyebrow and Harry went on. “For me, friends are … you don’t compromise anything for them. She let Dumbledore mess with my mind. My mind. She didn’t like it, but she didn’t stop it. So she’s not one of them, like you and Pel are.”

Ab’s face was unreadable as he considered Harry’s words. “Well then.” he said, standing up and clearing his throat. “Ah, fuck dueling today. Today, we work on detection spells so your scrawny arse don’t get cursed in the bloody back again!”

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26 July, 1977

Harry would have denied it if asked, but his stomach fluttered nervously as he walked the still halls of Hogwarts the next morning on his way to the Hospital Wing. He was supposed to work with Madame Pomfrey this week, after all, and since Dumbledore hadn’t obliviated his knowledge of the rest of his schedule, he figured he should act normally.

But he felt like he was entering a den of potential enemies. Stop being so dramatic. They didn’t actually hurt you!

The matron was busy checking the contents of a cupboard in the ward when he entered.

“Harry! Good morning, dear.” Her hands nervously twisted in her smock. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention. They don’t normally do that … and her voice is too high-pitched … Harry’s hands started sweating as his gut turned a cartwheel.

“Why don’t we go ahead and get started in my office?” she beamed, her smile wide.

Maybe too wide?

Another cartwheel.

This is not normal … I’m not being dramatic.

Helpless to think of a reason not to go into her office, he followed, absentlty fingering the mokeskin bag that held his wand and marking various objects he could wandlessly Accio to himself if absolutely necessary.

She bustled him through the door and sat him down in the seat across from her desk. Without a word she retrieved a small bottle from a locked drawer and handed it to him. “Drink. Drink it now.” Her overly-enthusiastic demeanor had entirely vanished.
Like hell. “No. No, ma’am, not unless you tell me what I’m drinking.” Oh God, do I have to fight Madame Pomfrey? Oh please, no.

“I’ll explain after you’ve had the potion young man. Now, I said drink it!” Her voice was tense, worried. Whatever she was up to, she didn’t seem to want to be up to it.

Harry closed his eyes in silent prayer, then threw the delicate glass bottle against the wall as hard as he could. He wandlessly summoned Pomfrey’s own wand from her unprepared grip and pointed it at her.

“I – I don’t want to fight you!” His voice sounded scared and young to his own ears.

“Harry!” she gasped, looking stricken. “Harry … I’m sorry! But you must know, I wouldn’t hurt you!”

He hardened himself as much as he could. “Then explain. Now. And don’t lie.” His voice was still shaky, but the hand that pointed the wand at her chest was absolutely still.

The matron put up her hands in surrender and sat down heavily in her chair. “I’m sorry. I … I didn’t know what to do … They don’t cover this in healer training,” she gasped helplessly. “Yesterday, yesterday Harry I found you in the Hospital Wing. The headmaster and some others, oh dear, I guess you heard something they didn’t want you to hear, so they Obliviated you. Do you know what that means?” He nodded mutely. “I don’t … it just felt deplorable, what they did. They skirted around it, but I know that it was even illegal, not that anyone would care what high-ranking wizards did to a supposed squib. But I just didn’t want – and I took an oath, and … Oh bother.”

She seemed momentarily lost for words, and then began again more professionally. “The potion you just destroyed reverses Obliviations. Please believe me! I don’t have any more of it, but perhaps I can procure some from …”

Oh thank God.

“Poppy.” He shocked himself by using her first name. “Poppy,” he repeated. “Thank you. I can’t tell you … see, I know all about what they did. The Obliviation was reversed almost as soon as I got home yesterday. So … I know what I missed, the bits that I was coming ‘round to consciousness for, anyway.”

She sagged back in relief. “I’m sorry, I must have terrified you – ”

Harry smiled as he handed her wand back to her. “I think we’re even on that one now. And thank you again. Really. I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’d do all this to help me.”

“Should I ask why the headmaster felt it necessary to perform an illegal Obliviation on you?”

He thought it over and shook his head. “Honestly, no. I’m just going to go on like I don’t remember it happening. I’d rather not draw attention, and what I heard honestly wasn’t all that important.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow but didn’t push it. “And … the headmaster?”

“I …” he chewed over the words for a moment. “I suppose I can understand why he felt it necessary to do what he did.” Harry could actually feel his expression darken and he fought not to curse in front of the matron. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to remember what he did to my fuc – my
bloody mind. I’ll remember that really well.”

Poppy seemed to want to say something, but then thought better of it. “I see, then. Well now, rather
than working on the bulk potion order today, what do you say we talk in here for awhile about the
various potions that can manipulate, modify, and mend a person’s mind? Seems the sort of topic a
young man like yourself may want to be well-versed in.”

He laughed “Sounds perfect, Poppy.”

She didn’t correct his use of her first name.

13 August, 1977

The Head was nearly deserted that afternoon. Pel and Dal weren’t in yet, and the only patron was the
white- and purple-haired old woman in a lace veil who sometimes came in to nurse Corpse Revivers.
Today she sat so quietly in a darkened booth that it was easy to forget her presence. Ab was at the
bar, watching Harry sweep with an odd expression on his face.

“Don’t you have a parole meetin’ in the village with that Auror a’ yours about now?”

“Yeah.” Harry glowered at the floor and didn’t stop sweeping.

“I suppose you’re up to somethin’ then, yeah?”

“Suppose so.”

“What?”

The force and speed of Harry’s sweeping became vicious. “I guess I want to make sure we aren’t
really friends.”

Ab raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Twenty minutes later Alice burst into the pub.

“Harry! Why didn’t you come to our meeting?”

Harry stopped scraping wads of Droobles gum off the bottom of a table into a rag and looked at
Alice with an expression of vague bewilderment pasted across his face. If either the Auror or the
tenager had glanced at Ab, they would have seen him rolling his eyes, having already cottoned on
to Harry’s plan.

“Huh?”

“Our meeting Harry. The parole meeting? Ringing any bells?”

“Meet – I’m sorry, but I don’t … I don’t think I know what you’re talking about, Miss, uh – ?”

Alice’s eyes boggled at the same time as the color began draining out of her face. “Harry? It’s just
me! Alice! You know, Auror Alice?"

Harry blinked at her.

“Oh dear Merlin,” the young woman whispered in dawning horror. “Harry?”

“Hmmm?”

“You know me! You know me, right? Alice, Alice Fawley?” She seemed very near tears, and Harry finally took a little pity on her.

He blinked a few times as if trying to clear his mind. “Oh … Oh, hey, er … Alice. Are you and, um … Fred here for a drink?”

“Frank, Harry! My boyfriend is Frank!”

“Yeah, right, sorry Alicia, er Alice. I swear I knew that, I think, I just can’t … So why are you here then?”

She was staring at him in concern, but seemed to be rallying now that he appeared to be coming round. “Um, I’m here for your parole meeting. Everything … Everything still going okay?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Okay. Okay, that’s good. And sir,” she turned to Ab. “Has, um, has Harry been okay this month?”

Ab frowned and sent Harry an annoyed look. “S’pose so. Boy’s always a bit of a fool …” The old publican broke off with a shrug.

“Oh – okay then. Well, thank you both, I’ll see you next month Harry, if I don’t run into you sooner.” Alice nearly ran from the pub.

A few beats after the door was shut firmly behind her, Harry slammed his rag down on the table.

“That was cruel, lad,” Ab said, his face severe.

“Probably, yeah.”

“I thought better of you.”

Harry huffed and pulled an ugly face. “I know. But if I don’t get a little payback, it’ll fester and fester in me and I’ll start to hate her for daring to act like everything’s just fine when she knows damn well what they did to me. What she let them do. So, yeah, I acted like a berk. Fine. Besides, if it makes her think the next time anyone’s trying to do shit like that, maybe she’ll stop it. It’s her damn job to uphold the bloody law, after all.”

He shook his head and curled his hands into fist. “Plus, she just saw me acting definitely not right. She should have taken me to St. Mungo’s based on all that. She didn’t. Now I know what I need to about her.”

Ab considered him for a few moments. “Next time you see her, you act normal for her, you got me? Only reason I played along was because they don’t need to know the whole thing didn’t take. But
you act right next time, boy. Fuck, you really want her to take you to Mungo’s?!” He shook his head in disgust. “We don’t need this to cause us problems we don’t need.”

Harry agreed with a roll of his eyes and slouched down to the kitchens without another word.

“Bastard teenagers,” Ab grumbled to the old woman. “Unthinking and bloody spiteful, the lot of ‘em.”

The woman chuckled lightly and sipped her drink. “Really? I seem to remember someone who was a bloody spiteful bastard all through his twenties, his thirties, his fort –”

“Bah, you hush now, lass,” the old bartender snapped without real venom. The woman just laughed again.

Chapter End Notes

(*) The following refers to the episode described in the untitled charity auction story penned by J.K. Rowling in 2008. I have not been able to find an actual copy of the story, and instead used the description found in this link: http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Untitled_charity_auction_story

Thanks for reading, and thank you so, so much for your comments!
XVI. The Unbirthday Boy – Who – Lived

25 August, 1977

“Won’t somebody please buy this lad an accomodatin’ lady?” Nappy Clank roared, to the delight of the crowd in the Head.

Martial Sorner clapped Harry on the back. “Anyone seen Yarda?!” The patrons laughed again at Harry’s expression of horror.

“Oh, Marty, that just isn’t right!” Pel snorted.

“But look at ‘im!” yelled Nappy, sloshing the contents of his tankard over Wigol. “Sixteen years old and blushin’ like a ruddy virgin, he is! Looks as Ab is failin’ in his, wazzit, ‘parental obligashuns,’ so it’s on us to fill in, mates! Somebody run to Mingy Chincherd’s in Knockturn an’ find him a pretty enough lady to make ‘im a man!”

Harry put his head in his hands.

*I’m never going to mention my birthday ever again.*

*And fuck them. I’m not blushing.*

It had started innocently enough. Two days earlier the old divination gamblers, as Harry had come to call them, had been in and Professor Pemphredo had wriggled his birthday out of him (with the year changed to 1961, of course). She’d taken off in a rush to spout all sorts of tripe about how this marked him an outgoing family-man who would excel at badminton or whatnot, though he blanched a bit when she claimed he was a great traveler. (*Even a broken clock’s right twice a day,* he’d grumbled to himself).

The problem was that the barflies were in that afternoon. And they were quite put out they’d missed Harry’s birthday.

Any excuse to drink, after all …

Which led to tonight’s very belated party at the Head. There wasn’t much in the way of traditional birthday party elements. His presents consisted of everyone buying him shots of ever more disgusting drinks (most of which he passed off to others or poured down the sink) and, it seemed, a prostitute.

Maybe.

A smiling, one-armed Doc Dearborn had come for awhile, with his wife Guin accompanying him and bearing Harry a delicious homemade chocolate cake. Despite her small frame and sweet face, the young woman had held her own with the crass clientele for quite some time. Harry rather suspected that Loch, one of the regular werewolves, had developed a bit of a crush on her as they traded recipes for meat pies.
He had been shocked when Argus Filch wandered in behind Hagrid at half-nine. The man ordered a single finger of whiskey, looked Harry in the eye as he raised his glass in a silent toast, downed the drink. With a flashed wry half-smile he walked out as quietly as he had entered.

By eleven that night – his new pub curfew on nights when he didn’t have to go to Hogwarts the next day – most of the customers didn’t really know Harry at all, but happily embraced the excuse to party.

*Oh Merlin, they’re still talking about prostitutes.*

Nappy, Martial, and a few others whose names he didn’t know were apparently debating which of two girls at Chincherd’s House of Scarlet Women would be better a match for Harry. Hagrid, to Harry’s surprise, soon joined in, but also staunchly defended his young friend’s right not to engage a prostitute.

*Maybe I can just slip out and make it to the stable …*

Harry’s escape was thwarted when two people scrunched into his booth and pulled up very close to him.

*Leather pants?*

Harry looked up into the wickedly smiling face of Moaning Myrtle … er, Myrtle Cramer.

“I’m not sure you boys need to go all the way to London to find a lady friend for little Harry here,” she purred and gave Harry a very … suggestive look.

The men – that traitor Hagrid included – roared in laughter again as Harry fought the slight wave of nausea. *Eurgh. She’s what? Fifty?* “Yeah, really not interested Mrs. Cramer –”

“Harry, dear, I’m so very much a widow … just call me Myrtle.” The leather clad leg pressed closer into his own.

The most awkward shared bubble bath ever appeared in his memory. *Almost all the bubbles were gone.* Moaning Myrtle had smiled at him like a ravenous predator back in the Prefects’ Bathroom in his fourth year. *Yep, I can totally see Myrtle growing up and becoming … this. Merlin.*

“Now my dear Widow Cramer,” drawled another familiar voice to his left. “Perhaps Harry here isn’t interested in what you and yours have to offer, hmm?”

*Oh for fuck’s sake.*

Captain Burke was sitting entirely too close to him on his other side. Today his shirt was unlaced a bit and Harry caught sight of a stylized skull and crossbones tattoo done in silver on his chest.

“Oh. Hi. Uh, why are you here? Is something … going on?”

“Nothing like that, dear, we were just here for a spot of business,” Myrtle said, “but since it’s your
“Well, we couldn’t resist spending a few minutes with the birthday boy!” Burke finished. His hand lightly stroked Harry’s thigh before retreating. “And besides, I make it a rule to always try to mix business with pleasure.”

Seriously? I have no idea what to do with this.

Harry latched onto the opening to have a conversation that was not laden with innuendo and which he knew he was totally unprepared for. “Oh! Er – what do you both do?”

Myrtle gave a squeaky little titter. “Little of this, little of that, don’t you worry about it, Harry dear.”

Burke leaned forward conspiratorially and flashed a rakish grin. “Me? Why Harry, I’m hurt you still haven’t heard of my brother and I. We’re pirates,” he confessed with relish.

“Pirates? Like, real pirates?” Harry deadpanned. The man couldn’t be serious.

“Indeed! Though I do prefer the term ‘marauder,’ myself. Adds a patina of sophistication to the whole business. I did tell you I was captain of my own ship, yes? The Bachelor’s Delight?” He winked.

Great. Another Marauder.

“Er – yeah, I guess you did.” This pirate business still seemed unlikely to Harry. “So, what, do you, I don’t know, pillage and plunder on the high seas or something?”

The Captain’s grin didn’t fade. “Now you’ve got it! My illicit adventures provide a critical service to the wizarding world while being fun, exciting, and profitable all at the same time.”

Myrtle snickered at Harry’s blank look. “Dear, you do know that most of the wizarding world is kept going by the unsanctioned appropriation of Muggle-produced goods, right?”

“Er – no …”

“Honestly, where do you think we get all of our food?” Burke broke in. “Our non-magical potions ingredients? Most of our building materials? Fabric? All the little things that keep the world going? Most of those things can’t just be conjured or transfigured, and if they can, they aren’t going to last permanently.”

Harry frowned. “I guess I never really thought about it, or figured that some wizards, I dunno, ran farms or whatever.”

Both his companions laughed. “Can you seriously imagine wizards tilling in the field, Harry?” Myrtle asked in shock. “Oh no, they’re much too important and powerful for such menial labor. We’d have house elves do it if we could, I’m sure, but there simply aren’t enough of them. Best leave it to the muggles, right Caff? Then all we wizards need to do is appropriate their products and sell them to wizardkind.”
“See, Harry, my brother and I, and others like us,” Burke explained, “target muggle shipments of all sorts of products, impound said products – usually without the Muggles even noticing – then transport them to Britain or wherever and sell them to distributors. That’s how places like even the greengrocers here in Hogsmeade get the vast majority of their inventory.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open.

“Now Peadar – my older brother – and I focus on maritime acquisition. Others concentrate on land avenues, but I rather like a life at sea. In fact,” oh great, there’s that smile again, “if you ever get bored with tavern life, I wouldn’t hesitate to take on a well-formed young man such as yourself as part of my crew. Life on the Bachelor can be quite … exhilarating.”

Making a valiant effort to just ignore the man’s shameless flirting, Harry persisted “But the Ministry? If you’re caught, won’t you go to prison?”

Myrtle and Burke shared a look and burst into giggles again. “Oh Harry, you’re such an innocent,” gushed the woman as she pressed her leg further into his own. “Sure, what Caff does is illegal, but the Ministry would never stop him. If they did, all the other pirates would take their business to another country and Britain would be left without food and other necessary things.”

It occurred to Harry that the meals he had eaten at Hogwarts over the years had likely been the product of piracy.

Weird … Oh, I bet Hermione would go rabid if she ever found out about this!

Further conversation was interrupted by a tall young man landing arse-down on top of their table.

Another, larger man was in the corner advancing on him as a witch with a pinched face surveyed them with delight. Oh, bar fight, Harry’s mind supplied even as his pint of Steaming Stout dripped into his lap.

Quick as lighting, Myrtle’s hand shot to her glasses and, before Harry could even blink, she had apparently transfigured them into two wicked little knives. One was suddenly implanted in the table between the first man’s legs, barely brushing against a very sensitive spot. The other slammed into the wall next to the second man’s head with hardly a whisper.

The pub grew silent. Myrtle smiled. “Boys, I don’t care much what you do, but it really isn’t polite to interrupt a girl’s conversation, yes?” Harry realized she was fingering a third, gleaming dagger.

The threat sounds so much scarier when she says it in that cute little voice of hers.

Raucous applause sounded in the pub as the two men both backed away muttering their apologies. Myrtle used her wand to summon the second dagger as she pulled the first from the table. In seconds her razor-sharp, gleaming silver glasses were again perched on her nose.

“That was brilliant, Mrs. Cramer!” Harry breathed.

“That was brilliant, Mrs. Cramer!” Harry breathed.

“Thanks, Harry,” she winked. “Ah, but it looks like it might be your bedtime.” She nodded in the direction of the bar and Harry saw Ab starting to head his way.

When Harry turned back to Myrtle, her lips suddenly crushed against his own without any warning. “Happy birthday, Harry!” she beamed as she broke off the kiss.
His mouth dropped open, but before he could react to that disconcerting new thing, Captain Burke was swooped in to give Harry his own kiss.

I should have closed my mouth, was all Harry’s shocked mind could sputter as the pirate’s tongue gently made its way into his mouth to briefly massage his own.

The captain broke the kiss quickly and tipped Harry a little grin. “Indeed, happy birthday, love!”

“Yeah,” was all Harry said as Myrtle moved to let him out of the booth. “Though it’s not really my birthday …”

Wait, that just wasn’t on … Maybe I should have punched him?

“You – bedtime!” Ab thundered at Harry, to the delight of the crowd.

“Yeah. Yeah.”

As he headed for the door that would take him down to the stables, he heard Burke call out “Too bad you’ll be alone in that hay tonight, beautiful! Send me an owl if you ever want anyone to roll in it with you!”

“I will cut off your cock, Caffrey!” Ab yelled and the rest of the pub laughed again.

Yeah. Next time I’m definitely punching him.

“Oh, he is fun to fuck with, isn’t he,” he heard Myrtle say over the din as he closed the door to the stairs.

A rather nonplussed Harry laid down in his straw bed that night, and didn’t even notice when Goat began eating his hair as usual.

So.

My first kiss was with Moaning Myrtle.

Moaning bloody Myrtle.

Merlin.

And my first kiss with tongue was with a pirate named Captain Burke of The Bachelor’s Delight.

Suddenly he started laughing helplessly, imagining the looks on Ron and Hermione’s faces if they ever learned either fact, and his smile followed him into sleep.

27 August, 1977

Harry and Ab spent the afternoon in the kitchens, the older man cooking a stew for the few guests of the inn, the younger working on Potions. It would, Harry concluded, never be his strong suit, but his Strengthening Solution was only a few shades off the turquoise the book said was optimal, and the
bartender had concluded it was “more’n passable.” Since it was included in the list of fifth year potions, Harry was gaining confidence that he wouldn’t completely foul up his O.W.L.s when the time came.

As Harry bottled his creation and then vanished the unusable scraps of his ingredients (beaming internally because vanishing was a fifth year transfiguration spell that he totally got), Ab turned and gave him the sort of penetrating look that usually meant he wouldn’t necessarily enjoy the impending conversation.

“What? What is it?”

“You ain’t done much with your freedom, Harry.”

_Okay …_

Harry frowned. “I don’t get what you mean – I’m still bound to the service to wizards crap and –”

“No what I’m talkin’ about.” Ab sat down and kept giving him _that_ look. “We figured out you didn’t time travel two months ago. We figured out you could act without destroyin’ the universe or whatever rot you were scared of. You’re _free_, but you ain’t done much with it.”

Harry shook his head in confusion. “I don’t – what would you have me do? I’ve mostly just been preparing for my exams …”

“Nothin’ stoppin’ you from goin’ to Hogwarts an’ learnin’ proper there.”

Harry’s mind rang with the sound of screeching tires.

“Wha – What? What are you – I can’t go to Hogwarts, Ab!” He stared at the old man as if he had gone mental. “I’m a squib, remember?”

“That was the lie you decided on when you thought you couldn’t go there because a’ the time travel. Moot point now.”

Ab sighed.

“What I’m sayin’ lad, is that we can come up with some reason you pretended to be a squib easy enough. Talk to some folks, get it cleared up, and you could be beddin’ down in the dorms in a few days, if you want to start as a fifth year. If you want to wait an’ take the exams, you could probably transfer in as a NEWT student at the start of winter term.”

The teenager laughed derisively. “Seriously? And what sort of excuse would cover pretending to be a squib?”

“You can have your pick. Pel an’ me came up with a whole list of ‘em. My favorite is that you’re an orphan an’ your guardian is an uncle who’s a piece of shit Dark wizard over in the Netherlands – no one bothers to keep track of all the piddlin’ Dutch wanna-be Dark wizards – so you ran away and pretended to be a squib so as not to have to live with him.”

_That’s your favorite? It’s a terrible lie!” No one would ever believe that._

Ab shrugged. “Most wizards are idiots, you know that. They’d eat shit like that up and ask for
Harry thought of some of the articles he read in his original world’s *Prophet. Not to mention Lockhart’s books. Ab’s got a fair point.*

“So, you want me and Pel to get started on makin’ you a proper wizard again?” Ab stood and made to leave.

Harry was still floored by the possibility of publicly ending his ruse. “No … I mean, please don’t. Yet. I need – I need to mull this over.”

Aberforth seemed unconcerned either way. “Whatever. Just let us know when to start.”

The kitchen door swung shut and Harry went back to methodically straightening the potions area, his mind a million miles away.

*Ab’s right. I could go to Hogwarts. There’s really nothing stopping me. I stayed in the Forest because I was scared of messing with the timeline and getting caught, but that’s all pretty much out of play now.*

*If I’d known then what I know now, I’d have been in Dumbledore’s office spinning some tale like Ab suggested my very first day here.*

*The only thing the authorities can’t know about is that I’m from another dimension, got Kissed, survived the Killing curse, and that I might have some unreliable knowledge about their future.*

*Seriously, who thinks “he must be a dimension traveler” when they meet a kid with a dubious history?*

*They’d never guess this.*

*...*

*I really could go to Hogwarts again.*

The thought didn’t quite set his heart to thrumming in excitement as he expected it to. Harry sat down at the tiny kitchen table and closed his eyes, picturing going to sleep in a red-and-gold trimmed four-poster, hanging out with friends, eating in the Great Hall, rushing to classes, maybe even joining the Quidditch team …

They were nice thoughts. Really, really nice.

Except every time he pictured his room in Gryffindor, he saw Ron, Neville, Dean, and Seamus there as well. It was Ron and Hermione he hung out with, he ate with, he rushed to classes with. The faces on the Quidditch team he would join were those of the twins, Angelina, Katie, and Alicia, not of James and Sirius.

*And who’s to say I would get sorted into Gryffindor again?* His inner voice asked him, bringing the idyllic scenes in his head to an abrupt halt. *The Hat did want to put me in Slytherin … and all the sneaking around and lying I’ve been doing all year probably makes me an even better candidate … I don’t think I’d be a ‘Puff, and while I like studying more than I used to, I’m definitely no Ravenclaw …*
Oh God, I’d be in the same House as Snape! And Barty Crouch Jr., I think, and probably dozens of other future Death Eaters.

No way.

The entire idea of being sorted again made his blood pressure spike.

But then Harry took a few steps back from his revulsion at the idea of being a Slytherin, because really, he thought, that’s not exactly what’s bothering me about the Houses …

... I just don’t want … I just don’t want to be told who I’m going to be by a bloody hat. The next two years of my life, and probably a lot after that, would be determined by whatever name the Hat calls out. If I’m honest, I don’t really care all that much about being a Gryffindor again. I mean, the two people I’m closest to are a former Hufflepuff and a former Ravenclaw. The houses just don’t really matter to me now.

No, I don’t really want to be a Gryffindor, or definitely a Slytherin, or any of the others. But as soon as I’m made just one thing, who I get to be won’t be entirely up to me anymore like it is here …

And a thought that Harry had often had in a blurry, indistinct sort of way arced above the turbulence of his mind, fully and perfectly formed, shining like a newborn star.

I want to get to control my own life. I want to control who I am and who I become.

It was so very simple, but the thought confronted Harry so absolutely that all others shuddered to a stop.

Going to Hogwarts is a step backwards. I’d be trying to get what I had in my Hogwarts back, but I’d also be giving up so much of my ability to choose for myself.

And haven’t I earned the right to take control of my own life? At Hogwarts I’d have to answer to professors, the Headmaster, my housemates … I’d have to study what and when they tell me to, learn what they want me to, jump through the thousand little hoops that come with living at the school.

... But I also have to answer to adults here – I answer to Ab, and he mostly determines our lessons, or Pel tells me what to read for History of Magic, so what’s the difference?

He gazed into an imagined distance, rolling his thoughts in his mind, searching for what he actually thought, because he knew there was a difference. An important one.

Oh.

It’s different because I chose to be here. I didn’t have to accept Ab as my custodian. I chose to. And even if my choices were forced some because of the Macnair thing … I would still choose him now.

I choose the Head over Hogwarts.
Because I can.

The next morning when Ab lumbered down for his mid-morning breakfast Harry looked up from reading _Quidditch_ scores in the _Prophet._

“Hey Ab, I thought about the proposition you made yesterday.”

Aberforth paused midway between the bar and the table with his plate of eggs.

“Thanks for thinking of that, but I’m not interested in going anywhere.”

The old bartender just shrugged. “Fine by me, lad.” He turned back around to grab a mug of tea he’d forgotten, so Harry missed the small smile that graced his face. “Eventually, though, you’ll want to come out as a wizard, I expect. Can’t have that great of a life as a squib, unfortunately.”

Harry blinked. He’d honestly not really thought the future beyond saving people and fighting Death Eaters. “Really?”

“Aye, an’ we can use whatever cover story you want then. But since you aren’t goin’ to Hogwarts, I’d suggest waitin’ until you’re seventeen to make it known. You’ll have your O.W.L.s and you’ll be of age, so no one can touch you or try to make you go anywhere you don’t want to go.”

The younger wizard nodded. _That makes sense … Weird to think I’ll be of age in less than a year!_

“Well, that’s settled then,” Ab continued. “You got History with Pel this mornin’, yeah? After that, take the goats out for a bit – an’ keep a sharp eye on Amaltheia. Bint’s lookin’ fat an’ I’m guessin’ she gave it up to Silvanus on the sly and got herself knocked up outta season.” The man shook his head at Goat’s apparent promiscuit. “Then be back by two or so. It’s a Friday, so we got a lot of prep to get done before Quisby shows up. We’ll do Defense and Charms tomorrow when we have time.”

“Sure, Ab, sure.”

19 September, 1977

“Aberforth, thank you for seeing me so early in your day.” Dumbledore sat in the upstairs sitting room, at once trying to gaze at a beaming Ariana and to avoid making eye contact with her.

Ab snorted, watching his brother’s eyes grow more uncomfortable. It wasn’t an accident he’d made Albus meet him in this room.

“Well. I suppose I should note that Harry is performing his service admirably. Though I admit Zoilus Dorbel has voiced some complaints …” Albus trailed off.

“That’s what you get for hirin’ that obnoxious shitstain,” Ab said with a shrug. “Harry ain’t whinged, really, but I guess he has him moppin’ up animal guts every other day. The little fuck really
havin’ students practice defense usin’ conjured pigs and cows?”

Albus grimaced.

“S’pose he is then. Anyhow, Harry ain’t stupid. He knows Dorbel’s only havin’ him do it so he can lord over him how much better he is. All he does is make himself look like a petty little shit.”

Dumbledore silently agreed with his brother that Dorbel’s conduct was abominable. In fact, in their capacity as Head Students, both Lily Evans and, to his surprise, James Potter had brought their own and some of the other students’ complaints to him about the way the teacher treated the boy during classes. There was, however, little he could do. Dorbel had come with the highest recommendations for his effective training methods, and the headmaster’s young charges needed to be able to defend themselves.

Plus they hadn’t had many applicants for the Defense position in the first place that year.

“But you ain’t here to talk about Harry, are you? So talk, if that’s what you want. I got other things I’d rather be doin’.”

Ab watched as his brother heaved a sigh and twirled a finger in his beard.

“Aberforth, I do not wish to involve myself in your business affairs –”

“But, I must beg you to rescind the action you took against Mundungus Fletcher last night. You know as well as I that the intelligence he gathers could be of great significance.”

Ab folded his arms and scowled. “Nope.” After all, it had taken what felt like forever for him to catch Dung’s spying out without betraying the fact that he knew about Harry’s Obliviation.

Dumbledore made an irritated gesture. “But you must understand his actions were only the result of my requests.”

“Oh, I certainly understand that,” Ab retorted. “I understand that I caught the little sneak reportin’ to you on what he thinks me and my boy are up to. You had a spy spyin’ on your other spy, and your spy got caught. Bad generalin’ on your part, if you ask me.”

“Aberforth! Please believe I only asked Mundungus to keep me appraised of your situation for you own safety! We’ve discussed enough in the last year just how precarious your position could become, especially because of Harry’s presence here. I cannot rely simply on your word!”

Ab’s magic flared angrily and his mug of tea burst. Ariana huddled behind the stone archway at the fore of her portrait, her wide blue eyes peering around the corner.

“Oh, I believe you. But you listen to me, Albus,” Ab said in a quiet, furious voice that brought to Dumbledore’s mind the image of a roiling, seething river about to break its dam. “You send a fuck like Dung to my pub to spy on me an’ mine, and you think I’m gonna let that slide? So yeah, I blacklisted the gormless fuck! He ain’t allowed in the Head ever again. Period. And hell, if I thought I could get away with blacklistin’ you, I would.”

The bartender took a deep breath and looked at Ariana. He tried to send her a reassuring smile, but
his mouth refused to lie.

“So it comes to this. What are you gonna do?”

Albus looked like he’d been punched. “Please, Aberforth … I want you protected and I need your information for the Order, but if I can’t trust that –”

“Seems to me the one who’s been shown less than trustworthy here sure as shit ain’t me.”

Albus looked at him for a long time. He eventually heaved another ponderous sigh, rose, and headed for the door to the stairs. “The next meeting for the Order is Friday at 11 p.m.”

“Thanks ever so kindly for respectin’ a barman’s schedule. Why, I never have anythin’ to do on a Friday night!” Ab spat.

“Oh you know very well that most of our members have day jobs, Aberforth. Friday nights allow for long meetings and for those individuals working at the Ministry to still perform their duties. Not everything I do is targeted at you, and not every decision I make can take your best interests alone into account!” Dumbledore shot back, his nostrils flaring.

Damn. Looks like I actually got under the git’s skin, Aberforth observed in some shock as his brother continued.

“You are becoming tedious, Aberforth.” Bloody hell, he’s right arsed off. “It may have escaped your notice, but we are no longer teenagers. To be frank, I grow weary of being tried for the same crimes for decades on end.”

“Don’t you dare –”

The headmaster cut the bartender’s indignant response off with a glare that made the air almost crackle. “I realize that you wish to imagine me some grand villain blithely tromping on the lives of the less powerful. Frankly, I care less and less about such dramatics. It is so very easy, after all, to occupy the moral high ground when the responsibility for orchestrating a defense of thousands does not rest on your shoulders, isn’t it? After all, you are not forced daily to make choices that afford no simple, perfectly moral solutions, are you?”

Aberforth hadn’t heard so much venom in his brother’s voice since they were boys. He threw back his head and laughed bitterly. “Yes, you’re so put upon. But I ain’t lettin’ Dung back in. Not when I got Harry here. That boy ain’t your business.”

Dumbledore threw up his hands in frustration, the last shreds of his attempt at equanimity eradicated. “I simply don’t understand why you insist on casting me as a threat to the boy! What have I done to him? Yes, I suggested he leave for the simple fact that he compromises your position and he is in a fair amount of danger living in so public a place that hosts such clientele. It’s only a matter of time before another Macnair comes after him, and the nature of your business makes it nearly impossible to truly protect him! And, you’ll notice, given how much you care for the boy, I have stopped pushing for him to leave despite my concerns.”

The older man shook his head sharply in exasperation. “Yes, I voted for his conviction, but only because it was our agreed-upon plan! A plan, may I remind you, that could not have been successful without my intervention! Which I did for you, and because the boy honestly seems a fine young man undeserving of such a fate. Truly, I am a monster, I suppose, for such crimes.”
It took all of Ab’s willpower not to mention the Obliviation as his brother’s shoulders sagged and he sank back into his chair.

“We aren’t young men anymore, Aberforth. I am exhausted with you constantly demanding an impossible perfection from me.” He sighed, seeming to age another decade. “Make your decision. The next Order meeting is at eleven p.m. on Friday. Come, don’t come. It is up to you.”

*Ain’t lost his spirit, then.* Ab swallowed his surprise at Albus’ outburst and avoided the memories of a much younger, much more passionate version of his big brother. Instead, he shot him a vicious little grin. “Well. There was some of your old spit and vinegar! Nice to see you still have a pair.” Ab gave him a long look. “At any rate, I s’pose I ain’t interested in abandonin’ the bigger fight. I’ll be at your meeting.” He paused. “Still think you’re a git though.”

Dumbledore blinked and then huffed as his younger brother started to chuckle. “Oh, bugger off, Ab,” he muttered as the door closed behind him.

The bartender let out a throaty laugh, drawing Ariana out from behind the stone. She rolled her eyes at Ab and the direction taken by her eldest brother.

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4 October, 1977

It was official.

Snape hadn’t been that bad.

Sure, he had despised Harry for no good reason, and the wretched treatment Harry had received under his tender mercies had guaranteed that the man’s enmity was enthusiastically matched by his student, but … now that Harry looked back, Severus Snape hadn’t been *that* bad.

At least compared to *Zoilus-fucking-arsehole-Dorbel*. Hedidn’t know if he could eviscerate a name, but just saying it in his head made Harry want to try.

The man was barely taller than Harry and almost as thin, yet he seemed far more delicate than the younger wizard. Only in his late twenties, Dorbel spoke like the most experienced of war veterans, though he had been most evasive when one of the sixth years in a class Harry was “helping” with had asked about his actual experience in combat. The more Harry listened to the man, the more he began envisioning a terrible chimera that boasted the officious snobbery of Percy Weasley, the self-satisfaction of Gilderoy Lockhart, and the morality of … of Adolf Hitler.

With regard to that last, Harry knew it wasn’t an apt comparison, but as a Muggle-raised young man he also knew in his bones that Hitler was, in fact, *the worst person ever*. And that seemed fitting enough for Zoilus Dorbel.

The man constantly requested his services in his classroom. Luckily Filch had claimed that he couldn’t spare Harry more than one or two mornings a week, but those few mornings were more
than enough to earn Dorbel an eternal place near the top of Harry’s “hate them forever” list.

The first time Harry had been required to help him was for his seventh year NEWT class, to which he’d apparently decided to teach the Entrails-Expelling Curse. On conjured farm animals. Only a few of the students didn’t look green as they watched and heard – and really the sounds were the worst – the animals’ guts explode out in massive heaps onto the classroom floor.

It was not the unfortunate ends that those pseudo-animals met which made Harry hate him. (After all, conjured beings couldn’t feel pain.) No, he had ordered Harry to clean up the piles of animal carcasses and wipe up the copious amounts of blood, guts, and other ... inside stuff by hand, despite the fact that he could simply vanish it all or wait twenty minutes before it vanished on its own. And all the while that Harry was slogging through the disgusting mess, Dorbel went on lecturing the students and throwing in little digs against squibs. He’d actually heard his mother’s counterpart gasp in fury when Dorbel lamented, with a little laugh to show that of course he wasn’t serious, that they couldn’t just use “the squib” for target practice, since that would allow the students to work on aiming at a person.

Every morning that Harry worked for the man became a demeaning and revolting endlessness punctuated by blatant discrimination.

But it’s okay, Harry reminded himself as he walked home, covered in the vestiges of students’ vomit. Today Dorbel had taught his fifth years to distract their enemies by casting a quick Seasickness curse (which even he had to grudgingly admit was a nice trick).

It was okay.

Really.

It was okay because Zoilus Dorbel was going to die.

... Or become a werewolf. Or lose his entire memory. Or something, dammit!

Harry, just like most every Hogwarts student in his time, was convinced that the Defense position was cursed. Whatever else happened, Zoilus Dorbel was out at the end of the year.

Preferably in a very painful, very public way.

Oh yes. Zoilus Dorbel was going to die.

When the still-seething young wizard entered the pub he found most of the regulars in early and the divination gamblers happily ensconced in the corner arguing about an aspect of Neptune or some such nonsense. He was on his way to the private washroom to change and wipe away regurgitated Hogwarts breakfasts when he had an idea. A brilliant idea.

“Uh, excuse me, ladies and Wig ...”

“Oh ho, well hello little Devil!” Pemphredo gushed. “What has your wand in such a knot on this fine
Harry got straight to it. “Would you be interested in opening up betting on, ah, a particular event?”

Dalcop swiveled round in his stool. “Whatchoo up to, Harry?”

Pemphredo was looking at him with a cat-got-the-canary expression. “Indeed, my Devil, what sort of wager are you considering?”

Harry couldn’t help but return her evil little smirk with one of his own. “Well, ma’am, I, er – I don’t really wish ill on any of your colleagues, but I was thinking about opening up bets regarding whether or not … (hell with it, he thought) … Professor Dorbel finishes his first year at Hogwarts and, if he doesn’t, bets on what might happen to him.”

The two other crones whipped their heads around to look at the Divination professor so sharply that Harry was surprised their lacy veils didn’t catch on anything. Pemphredo’s eyebrows had risen high enough that he could view all the clumsily-applied layers of violet eyeshadow. Her plum-painted lips widened into a feral grin. “My dear, dear Devil, I think that’s an absolutely fascinating idea! I’ll even draw up odds and send them back to the pub, if you like.”

Pel and Dalcop were grinning. “I think we an’ many others would be interested in getting in on such action, though of course we can’t boast having the Sight,” Pel admitted with some grace.

With a toothless smile, Wigol said … something.

“All right, it’s agreed,” Pemphredo said, “I’ll draw up the odds and Messrs. Palter and Peloother here will officiate all wagers made at the pub. Let’s close the betting, ah, perhaps on the first of the new year, and put down the fiscal end of the academic year – that’s July 31st – as the final date of play.”

Harry grinned. The first annual observance of what would become known as the “Plight of the Professor Pot” was underway.

17 October, 1977

“Okay, so that’s eight galleons for Flutterstock on accidental beheading or fatal amputation at 75-1 odds, two galleons for Sorner on misfired student curse at 10-1, sixteen sickles – seriously? – on murdered by irate father because he was fucking his daughter for Gobermouch at 30-1, an’ another one galleon for Harry on –” Peloother choked a bit on his ale “on death by auto-erotic asphyxiation, at 1000-1 odds.” The old solicitor shot Harry a look. “How the hell do you even know about this sort of thing?”

Harry shrugged. “I work at the Hog’s Head, Pel. At this point, how could I not?”

Pel conceded the point. “But haven’t you already bet on five other outcomes or so?”

“Seven. But I’m trying to cast a wide net. And besides, doesn’t he just look the sort to die like that?”
The crowd of participants in the Professor’s Pot and other interested onlookers laughed. Casting an eye over the Head, Harry was gratified to see just how well the new game had caught on. The entire west wall of the pub was now taken up by a huge blackboard that set out the odds and tallied the various bets so far. Every day they had to consult with the divination gamblers to get odds on ever-stranger situations. Certainly most had to do with Dorbel’s death, though a good many had proposed that he live through his time at Hogwarts. Hell, some poor sod had even bet that Dorbel would luck into a plush position with the Aurors, at 150-1 odds.

He was less enthused to see that “Killed by enraged teenaged squib” was holding on as the most popular choice at 6-1 odds.

Pel was still at it. “We also have some absentee wages, several of which were sent to us under conditions of anonymity but the owls were, well, let’s just say that they live in a big castle nearby!” These were Harry’s favorites. Apparently Pemphredo had let the pool slip to a few of her colleagues. McGonagall’s twenty galleon wager that the man found a way to be accidentally enslaved by revolutionary house-elves (20,000-1 odds) wasn’t one he was likely to forget.

Pel ran through the new bets quickly. For the last one, he sighed. “Need more odds again. This one wants to bet 3 galleons that cats feast on the man’s corpse before its discovery, regardless of the cause of death.” Harry snickered and grabbed the letter. Sure, it was supposed to be kept anonymous, but he worked here. He could barely contain a louder laugh when he saw the bet was signed ‘Pomona Sprout.’

As the crowd dispersed, Pel looked over his shoulder and snorted. “Ain’t surprisin’ that. Heard from Hagrid that Sprout’s been up in arms about the way Dorbel’s treating Filch. Apparently he’s about as kind to the caretaker as he is to you. Poor bastard.”

Harry scrunched his face in confusion. “Dorbel? Why pity –”

“Not that moron, my friend, Argus Filch. There’s a man who sure as shrivelfigs doesn’t deserve what wizards dished out to him.” Noticing that the confusion hadn’t left Harry’s face, he pushed on. “Don’t tell me you don’t know! I mean, why Filch is at Hogwarts?”

Harry shook his head. I never even thought about it.

Pel sighed and took a pull from his drink. “It’s about the same sort of situation as yours, really. You know about the squib marches, yeah?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “Kind of. In the ‘60s, they wanted better rights.”

His older friend shook his head in mild disgust. “I know what our next lesson’ll be on then. That’s about the right of it, though there’s way more to it than that. Anyhow, Argus Filch participated in some of them. Not an organizer or an agitator, just as a demonstrator. At the last really major one, back in ’70, some wizard kids attacked – or were just ‘playing with’ – a squib teenager who was there. Filch intervened, pulled two of ‘em away and ended up beating the piss out of the last one. Broke his jaw and his collarbone. Luckily no one was permanently hurt, or Filch would’ve been done for. As it is, he got smacked with ten years of full-time “service to wizards” to be served at Hogwarts, so as he could, as they said, ‘learn to appreciate the unparalleled majesty of wizarding youth.’” Pel sighed. “Honestly, he was bloody lucky. That happened now, he’d be in Azkaban, no
question. But back then the squib movement had more power.”

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “That’s – that’s horrible.”

Pel nodded. “Well, it’s not like the man would do that shit job voluntarily. I heard he was expelled from some rich pureblood family but made his way well enough to end up enrolled in some non-magical school to learn a Muggle trade.” He sighed. “That all ended right fast, I suppose, and his sorry arse got pulled right back into the world that didn’t want him.”

Christ, no wonder he hated us all. The Filch of Harry’s original dimension and time was certainly not one to elicit Harry’s sympathy – threatening to torture children and delighting when they were sent into dangerous situations in the Forest just wasn’t on, no matter how much the world had kicked a person in the teeth – but Harry’s time as a squib had more than showed him how easy it was to hate wizards. He could well imagine years of constant humiliation warping the decent man he knew today into the twisted, older Filch he had despised.

Harry looked around carefully to make sure no one was in listening distance. “Pel, he was still there in 1995 … why do you think he’d still be there if he’d served his sentence by what, 1980?”

The older man frowned. “Well, maybe things played out different where you’re from. Or … or maybe the sentence was the same, and he found by the end there wasn’t another place for him to go to earn steady pay. I don’t know, Harry.”

Harry sighed. He didn’t know about his original Filch, but that man no longer mattered here. The Filch of this time and place was a decent man who treated him well, and Harry hated to think that he’d been subjected to the same Ministry bull. Ten fucking years of enforced service. Merlin.

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1 November, 1977

One very good thing about living as a tramp in the wild, Harry decided, was that last year nothing bad had happened to him on Halloween for the first time in five years.

Well, maybe something did. It could have been Halloween the day last year when I twisted my ankle in that ravine. But as Harry hadn’t been more concerned with the exact date other than to note that it was “October-y” or “November-ish,” Halloween 1976 had passed with no fanfare.

This Halloween he walked quickly home from Hogwarts, much more on edge. He’d waited all morning for something terrible to occur, but his day in the greenhouses was entirely peaceful, with nary a Dark Lord, Death Eater, or Dorbel in sight.

The afternoon had been spent alone working in the barn on Transfiguration and reading a bit for Pel’s History of Magic class. No trolls, basilisks, escaped godfathers, or goblets of fire intruded on his solitude.

Although Halloween tended to be a busy night at the Head, this year it fell on a Monday, and the pub was near-deserted until nine, when Quisby relieved him and Harry went to the kitchen to take care of the dishes.
His bedtime came and he let out an apprehensive breath. Halloween was just about over, and nothing bad had happened.

*Maybe Halloween is only cursed for me in my original dimension?* he had thought.

Now, as the November morning dawned on him, Harry knew it had been too good to be true.

The scrap of folded parchment lying on the ground just outside his door could have been a bit of rubbish that had innocently blown by.

It could have been, but for the four rocks placed precisely in each of its corners that held it fast to the walk.

*Harry* was all it said on the top.

*Yeah, definitely not random rubbish.*

He should have waited for Ab to wake up before touching it, he knew. The paper could have been cursed with any number of terrible spells, it could have had a contact poison on it, it could – he repressed the flashbacks – have been a portkey.

But of course he didn’t wait. Instead he scooted the rocks off the top, picked up the parchment, and unfolded it. A single question, written in a shaky, jagged hand was scrawled across the cream parchment in dark red ink.

*The price is fixed, isn’t it?*

Harry had tried to forget about the graffito on the Post Office they’d found earlier that autumn (*a soul for a soul*), but he’d known then that somehow it would come back to haunt him.

When he closed his eyes he heard the rasping and strangely sad voice of the Dementor echo in his mind as he’d once heard it echo across a vast nothingness.

*A soul for a soul, little wizard.*

*The price is fixed. A soul for a soul …*

This … this just didn’t make sense. *Am I being haunted by Dementors? No one in this world but me, Ab, and Pel know about what they said to me.*

He shook his head in frustration.

*No, Dementors just wouldn’t do this.*

*Breathe. Think. Take this inside and hide it. Tell Ab when he wakes up. Then go from there.*

*I can handle this.*
Harry straightened his spine. He *could* handle this.

Or so he thought until he turned around.

The second message of the day was painted in huge, jagged, two meter-high letters across the back wall of the pub, the back wall of the stables – his *bedroom* – like an angry red tattoo.

**THE BOY WHO LIVED**

*What? What?*

His next thought branded itself on his brain in burning black and blistering white.

*Someone knows.*

Harry didn’t wait around for Ab to wake up. He Flooed Pel and ordered the very grumpy solicitor to get to the pub, *now please*, promising a hangover potion, then thundered up the stairs and pounded on the old bartender’s door until Ab wrenched it open.

Not waiting for the man to bark at him, Harry gasped “Emergency. Downstairs now. Pel’s coming.”

Twenty minutes later, after administering Pel his hangover potion and showing the two men the parchment and the back wall of the Head, the trio found themselves hunched over in the empty pub, trying to puzzle out the two messages.

Pel, as usual, took charge of getting them to focus on the facts after he had cast a small barrage of charms on the parchment. “Okay. First, there’s no traces of *anything* magical on this, so revelation spells are a dead end. It’s clear that the note an’ the paint were done by the same person. The writing is identical. An’ Harry says it looks about the same as the graffito on the Post Office. So we’re probably only dealing with one person. A person who obviously knows something *somehow* about Harry’s life before he came here, maybe even what happened in his 1981.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “I mean, yeah, they know they nickname, but that doesn’t mean they know about Voldemort, right?”

Ab shook his head. “Didn’tcha notice the ‘I’ in “lived” out there?” Without waiting for an answer, he dragged the younger wizard back to the back garden, Pel in tow.

Harry cursed when he realized the ‘I’ was rendered like a thunderbolt, an exact replica writ large of his own scar.

“Well,” the barkeep grunted, “now that we’ve all seen it, I’m gettin’ rid of this. Won’t do to have anyone else notice it.” With that, he vanished the paint, though Harry still felt as though it was there like an invisible stain, reminding him that he wasn’t *really* safe here in his home.
A few moments later they were back in the pub. “So who could be doing this?” Harry asked. “I mean, Dementors in this world wouldn’t know about what happened … Though that one in the STIFF didn’t affect me, come to think of it … but even if they did, I just can’t see Dementors doing this. They’re … they’re Dementors!”

“Nor I,” admitted Pel.

“Could be like we thought was possible with the first one. Some seer getting a weird feel from the boy and just spoutin’ it off. Might not even remember doin’ it – lots of prophets have no memory of what they say.”

*This … doesn’t feel like that time in third year with Trelawney though …* Harry made a dubious face.

“I’m not convinced of that either, Ab. Doesn’t seem too seer-like to leave a note all nice and neat for the lad, an’ especially not like one to ask a question. Seers pronounce, after all, they don’t ask questions when they’re in a trance.”

*The price is fixed, isn’t it?*

Harry nodded slowly. That didn’t sound like a prophesy at all.

Eventually the three men surrendered to a breakfast that was silent and contemplative, and didn’t inspire any sudden answers.

“Wait an’ see, again, I reckon. Whoever it is don’t seem to be interested in notifyin’ the Ministry, at least,” Ab finally said. “I’m strengthening the perimeter charms around the Head, but I can only activate them when we’re closed and have no guests, so I ain’t too optimistic about them stopping this fucker.”

Harry just shook his head and glared at the parchment. “Someone knows, guys. And … I think they’re playing with me. They’re fucking playing with me.”
XVII. Examinations In Progress

17 November, 1977

So that’s that done, I guess.

A bemused Harry walked home from after his final day of prescribed service to wizards at Hogwarts.

600 assigned hours. 20 hours a week. 30 weeks. Has it really been that long since the trial?

Given that he usually faced some sort of life or death situation every year before he could leave the school, he rather expected something dramatic to happen that week, especially since receiving the last communication from what he privately thought of as his “Dementor stalker.”

Yet nothing had happened, and the last few weeks had actually been quite … profitable. He’d spent them mostly with Hagrid, Slughorn, and Sprout, and had made sure to help himself liberally to the potions stores and the greenhouses. He’d figured at some point the mokeskin bag from Hagrid would finally become too stuffed for more stolen ingredients, but he’d never discovered that point.

Well, there are still chances in the future, he grinned.

On the previous Monday he’d gotten permission from Ab to accept a one-morning per week job with Madame Pomfrey, who had extolled the virtues of his help to the headmaster. It wouldn’t pay much, but the matron was adamant that he continue to learn from her, and this would give them ample time together to practice. He was also tentatively set to watch the ‘squib-friendly’ greenhouses for Sprout again in the summer, so that would bring in some much-needed galleons and further opportunities for petty larceny.

His final meeting with Filch had been oddly bittersweet. He’d managed to reach the man’s office before him at the end of the day, and rummaged through his files until he found the Map, which he happily – if a bit guiltily – pocketed. Filch had walked in moments later, Mrs. Norris in tow.

With a terse grin and a final Chocolate Frog tossed his way, Filch admonished him not to be a stranger. Mrs. Norris curled around his leg one more time, and Harry realized with a pang that he’d rather miss being the one teenager in the school that Argus Filch and Mrs. Norris could stand.

Still, the prospect of having all his mornings but one back to himself was exciting. He had plenty to do right now with his Belgian O.W.L.s looming ever closer, but come spring he hoped to use the time for something more engaging than revising.
After a quick late lunch at the Head, he trundled off to the Forest to meet Ab for a Defense lesson, a now full-grown Colin lumbering at his side. Harry smiled as he watched him attempt to walk gracefully but failing miserably as he still hadn’t gotten accustomed to his increased height.

The thestral nearly walked into a tree. “Oh, Colin, watch where you’re go –”

And then Colin was in the air in a flash as the tree to Harry’s other side got hit with a curse and rained chunks of wood on the young wizard.

“Aigis Makra!” Harry sent up a shield designed to protect him both from spells and sharp debris as he dove for cover behind the tree into which Colin had nearly walked.

*Shite, I don’t know where they are or how many there are.*

Harry cast about frantically trying to think of a spell that could help him defend himself and get answers to those questions at the same time.

A transfiguration charm modification he had thought of some weeks back popped into his head. To his pride, he’d managed to perfect the bird-conjuring spell (though casting it non-verbally was still way beyond him). At the time, he’d thought that birds weren’t the most useful things to be able to cast, especially in battle, and had figured that the same wand movement with modified intent and incantation could perhaps produce something with a little more … sting to it.

*What the hell, why not?*

“Vespae Crabrones!” The sound of a gunshot echoed through the forest as plumes of smoke accompanied the small swarm of giant European hornets – a species known for their aggression and interest in bright lights – out of his wand.

At the same time, his opponent – or one of them – cast a *Reducto* at the tree he was using for cover. As Harry ducked out of the way just in time to avoid being injured, his hornets converged on the threat and zoomed to the underbrush ahead of him where his attacker seemed to be concealed.

A sharp half-scream followed by an angry “ever-living fuck!” sounded from the bushes before the hornets were engulfed in an *Incendio*.

Breathing heavily, Harry tried to hold back his grin as a sullen and disheveled Ab floundered out the bushes, a number of swelling red mounds popping out on his face. The flaming hornets slowly burned out and dropped around the older wizard.

“A sharp half-scream followed by an angry “ever-living fuck!” sounded from the bushes before the hornets were engulfed in an *Incendio*.

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“Hornets.” It wasn’t a question.

Harry grinned. “European hornets. They like to attack things. And most people are at least surprised when a swarm of two-inch long hornets attacks them out of nowhere.”

Ab grimaced as he gingerly fingered one of the stings. “You really can be a mean little fucker, boy.” He pulled some salve out of his robes. “Figured I’d bring this ‘cause you’d need it. *Hmpf.* Well done, lad.”
“Should I ask why you were trying to take my head off without warning?”

“Wanted to see how you handled yourself in an ambush. Figured we could practice some dodging today as well.” Ab grunted. “Thanks for not sendin’ that bloody bread-slicing or carrot-peeling spell at me. Was a bit concerned about them comin’ my way, I ain’t too proud to admit.” Ab gently hunkered himself down on a stump and began applying the salve. “’Fore we get started, wanted to let you know I got your O.W.Ls all set up. You’re takin’ them in Leuven startin’ on December 12th and goin’ through the 23rd. Wanted to do ‘em in January, but they ain’t offerin’ them again until April.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. “So … so soon? That’s less than a month away!” His heart was beating entirely too fast and his palms were suddenly sweating. *Is this what Hermione feels like all the time?*

“Bah, you’ll be fine. Least on the tests that matter. I put you down for Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology, Potions, Creatures, History, Astronomy, and Muggle Studies. Figure you’ll probably fail Astronomy – no loss for you – but the rest you’re in good shape. Didn’t bother with Divination.”

Harry snorted. A single afternoon with Wigol ended with the wispy little man grinning and pronouncing him “totally rubbish” at the subject (at least that’s what Harry thought he said), so Divination was simply abandoned.

“Got your schedule for you back at the Head, but stop frettin’. You’re a fine enough wizard and you ain’t as stupid as you look.”

“Based on what I’ve seen, I’d have to agree. You *are* a fine young wizard, aren’t you Harry?”

Both men jumped at the high-pitched sound of the unexpected voice and whipped around, wands out.

Moaning Myrtle stepped out from behind a tree back down the path Harry had taken to the glade, slowly clapping her hands with a wicked smirk across her face.

“Well shit,” Ab muttered.

Myrtle gave her tinkling giggle. “Are you being a bad boy again, Harry?”

His mind wasn’t helping him think through the most logical response – it was too busy being stuck on a loop of profanity – so Harry just went with his first instinct. *Deny, deny, deny.*

“Myrtle! Oh! This, uh- isn’t what it looks like! I mean –”

Ab snorted into his hand.

The petite brunette’s grin got even wider. “Really Harry? Looks to me like the Head’s little squib is actually a wizard practicing spells with old Aberforth here in the Forbidden Forest and preparing to take his O.W.L.s next month in Belgium.” She clucked her tongue at their glares. “You boys should have been more careful. It was easy enough for a lady interested in where you two got off to so often
to follow Aberforth, and walking through a forest with a great bumbling thestral isn’t so good for stealth, Harry dear.”

“Well shit,” Harry sighed. *Though she followed Ab, so at least I’m off the hook for that one.*

Ab’s face was a like a block of granite. “Cramer, this ain’t a game. Don’t you –”

The smile dropped from Myrtle’s face as she cast a speculative glance at Harry. “Never said it was, old man. Harry could have come out as wizard back in April and saved himself a whole heap of trouble. Instead he kept his mouth shut and dared the old purebloods to give him the Kiss.” The woman looked faintly impressed. “Whatever is going here, it definitely isn’t a game, is it?”

“No, it really isn’t,” Harry admitted stiffly.

Myrtle nodded slowly, then gracefully plopped herself down on the stump that Ab had been sitting on. “Well then, let’s deal!” her voice suddenly bright and her eyes gleaming.

“Fuck’s sake, Cramer,” Ab began, “he’s a boy. Can’t you just keep your mouth shut and leave him be?”

“No, I could, Ab. But … I’m not going to just make a promise to keep my lips sealed about Harry’s little secret. Not without getting something in return.” Harry gaped as she turned and grinned at him. “Not to worry, dear. I promise it won’t be anything too strenuous,” the word curled around him like a cat wanting attention and he felt his face redden. “But you see, Harry, in my experience relying on others to keep your secrets out of the goodness of the hearts just leads to disappointment and regret. A person’s goodness of heart only seems to last as long as keeping that secret doesn’t hurt them.” She laughed without mirth. “No, I prefer to rely on something much more faithful than ethics. So, let’s deal!”

Harry glanced at Ab, who just shrugged, quirked and eyebrow, and made a ‘go on with it, then’ gesture. *Merlin, is he testing me? Thanks a lot, Ab.*

“Er, okay … so what do you want?”

“Fuck’s sake, lad.”

“Oh, Harry,” Myrtle said, shaking her head. “You never, ever start like that!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, I don’t know how to do this!”

Myrtle brought a hand delicately to her temple. “And you never say something like that either.” She sighed. “Just this once, I’ll help you a little. First, when you’re dealing, you want to get as much out of the other person as you can, in addition to your main desire, and you want to give as little as possible. Now, you want me to keep my mouth shut. What else do you want?”

After a quick glance at Ab – who just closed his eyes in exasperation – Harry gave it a try. “Well, I want … I guess I want to make sure you don’t tell anyone. And I want – (I want to make sure I don’t have to tell you any more of my secrets) er, nevermind that one.”
The little woman sat back and idly played with a lock of brown and gray-streaked hair. “Don’t want to give away too much of what you want? Better. So how do you make sure I don’t tell anyone, keeping in mind there’s no way I’m taking any sort of secrecy oath?”

Harry frowned and thought hard. “Um … maybe if I knew something about you that you didn’t want me to tell?”

“Blackmail or extortion,” she grinned, “not a bad thought. And how would you get this material?”

*What do I know about Myrtle Cramer?* Harry racked his brain and recalled that Pel had once said that she was involved with a bunch of illegal activities … and when he’d asked at his unbirthday party, the woman had been evasive. “Maybe you could use my help a bit in your, um, business? That would be something I could give you, and I’d also probably learn some stuff that you may not want other people to know.”

Myrtle looked speculative. “Nicely reasoned, Harry!”

“Oh bloody hell,” Ab groaned. “You really can’t stay out of shit even for a day, can you, boy?”

The woman ignored him and smoothed the skin-tight leather of her trousers. “Not a bad idea, perhaps, but can you be useful to me? I know the old man won’t let me put you in danger, so putting you on transport of … product is out.” She frowned. “Those wasps of yours were a pretty good on the fly spell. You any good at enchanting?”

“Um, no, I don’t think I’ve even really tried, Mrs. Cramer.”

“He ain’t complete bollocks at it,” Ab broke in. “An’ yeah, you have tried, lad. Don’t you remember those rocks round your neck?”

Harry’s eyes widened and his hand went to his mokeskin bag. Myrtle giggled, “Well, let’s see your little stones, Harry!”

Ignoring that bit of innuendo, Harry reached into his bag and withdrew a few of the rocks he’d programmed more than a year ago with Point-Me and banishing charms. Handing them to Myrtle, he quickly explained how he’d used them to hunt. By the time he was finished she looked fairly interested.

“Definitely functional …” she murmured, “but juvenile in design …” Harry winced. “These, yes these show some promise, and you’re not incompetent for someone your age at inlaid charms.” She tapped her teeth with her fingers as rolled the stones in her palm. “Hmm … Just so happens I’m working on a project right now that could use someone who can handle simple inlaid magic.”

Harry stared at her. “Are you saying you’ll keep quiet if I what? Charm things for you?”

Myrtle hopped off the stump and gave him a quick lick on the nose. “Something like that, dear.” She laughed as he furiously wiped his face. “Yes, I think you’ll do nicely.”
“Well done, lad, well done,” Ab remarked dryly from his perch at the kitchen table later that afternoon. “I was lookin’ forward to havin’ you around more now that Hogwarts was done, but no, you had to go and get involved in Cramer’s little criminal empire.”

Harry huffed. “Sorry for your suffering. Seems you should have to give up more than just my extra help around the pub, seeing as you’re the one who led her to us.”

Ab gave the growling snort he reserved for moments when he was annoyed but couldn’t dispute a point.

“Besides,” Harry continued, “I won’t be gone more than a few half-days a week, I think, and it’s only until the New Year – thanks for adding the deadline, by the way. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it. A lifetime in the service of Moaning Myrtle …” He trailed off in horror.

Ab grunted again. “Just make sure you don’t do more than you agreed. You sure as shit don’t the sort of trouble Cramer and her little gang can bring on.”

The younger wizard nodded, though he couldn’t see how he’d be in much danger. The agreement they’d reached was relatively straightforward. Harry was to spend four to ten hours a week with Myrtle, charming something, he didn’t know what, to do something. Ab had even thought to prod him to demand a small fee for his services.

Harry suspected Aberforth grudgingly trusted Myrtle, since he didn’t raise too much of a fuss about the whole thing, and got her to guarantee that he wouldn’t be put in any dangerous situations. His only sanctioned excursion with the group was to be during his trip to Belgium for his exams. Apparently a few families were hoping to escape to the continent, and Harry was to accompany them on a ship that would take them to Zeebruge.

The young wizard was convinced that he wasn’t really going to protect others so much as to have others protect him, given Ab’s satisfied expression when Myrtle agreed to have him on the ship.

“Well, you ain’t goin’ with that crazy little thing until Tuesday, so don’t be dwellin’ on it now. You got studyin’ to do and a weekend to get through, so just focus on that, yeah?”

Harry nodded again, thinking with some amusement that Hermione would probably never have expected him to get a job manufacturing illegally-enchanted whatevers on the day he “left” Hogwarts.

19 November, 1977

A few days later saw winter bluster into the village in time for a Hogsmeade weekend. Aberforth had turned the pub over to Harry for the morning and most of the afternoon, vaguely citing a meeting that the young man suspected had something to do with the group who had set up Platform 9 that summer. The howling winds, sleet, and snow seemed likely to prohibit even the feeblest Hogwarts business, especially since the students would have one more chance to visit the village before the holidays.
The white- and purple-haired old woman that Ab seemed to have a soft spot for, whose name Harry had learned was Hippia, sat in her usual back-corner table, and two men he recognized by sight but not name were ensconced in a booth by the window, drinking pints of Steaming Stout and having a murmured conversation. Harry was leaning back against the shelf by the till and leisurely reading the *Prophet* when he registered the sound of the door opening and someone taking a seat at the bar.

“What’ll it be –” He cut himself off mid-question, as he looked into the anxious face of Lily Evans, her face flushed from the cold and her smart violet coat liberally dusted with sleet and snow. His mother sat at the bar, trying – and failing – to appear completely comfortable with her surroundings.

*Why in the world would she be here?* Sure, he’d seen her around during his service to wizards at Hogwarts, though he hadn’t spoken to her since his first day there in April. But now that he knew she wasn’t his *actual* mother, only her dimensional counterpart, he couldn’t resist the pull to interact with her, free from his earlier anxieties about the timeline.

Harry forced himself to keep his face neutrally polite. “What’ll it be for you, uh, This Year’s Head Girl?”

Lily gave a false, nervous little laugh. “Oh, I – I don’t … uh, tea?”

“Tea?” Harry swallowed his smile. “Sure, I can do tea. Want to make that a toddy though? Perfect for a day like today.” She looked hesitant. “I promise I won’t make it very strong.”

The girl gave him a helpless shrug but smiled. “Yeah, okay, why not. But, not too strong, right?”

Lily did not look enthused that he was leaving her alone in the pub while he went to the hob downstairs to grab the kettle, and her shoulders slumped in relief when he returned. They were silent as he steeped the tea, added honey, cloves, cinnamon, whiskey, and a bit of lemon, nutmeg, and vanilla. His mother kept her eyes on his hands the whole time, and Harry internally smiled in approval. It was a good idea for a young person to keep an eye on what they were going to drink, especially in a place like this.

Lily looked a bit suspicious as she took a tentative sip, but her face quickly brightened into a wide smile. “Wow! I’ve never had one of these … it’s really good.”

He answered with a pleased shrug. “Glad you like it.”

One of them might have said more, but Loch the werewolf and his new girlfriend entered, and Harry was busy for a bit preparing their lunch order.

Eventually returning to the bar, he found Lily fingering her empty glass and watching him with a strange look on her face. “Want another?”

“Yeah, actually I would,” Lily smiled, “but I better not. I’m not really used to drinking …”

“Well, can I get anything else for This Year’s Head Girl?”

The redhead frowned and then her eyes widened. “I – I never introduced myself to you, did I?” A blush crept up her neck and into her cheeks as Harry simply shook his head.
“I – I’m sorry. I should have.”

Harry just shrugged good-naturedly. “Don’t worry about it. I’m pretty used to it.”

She bit her lip and stuck out her hand. “Well, I’m still sorry. I’m Lily, Lily Evans.”

A bit amused, Harry shook her hand, barely keeping himself from raising an eyebrow at her surprisingly firm grip. “Harry. It’s nice to meet you, formally, that is.”

They stood in awkward silence for a few beats as Lily watched him and Harry floundered under her scrutiny. “So, Lily, can I get you anything else?”

Her eyes snapped to attention and a flush crept over her cheeks. “No – yes, actually – well, no…”

*Well said, mum.*

“You’re sending some pretty mixed signals,” Harry deadpanned.

Her blush deepened. “No, I mean, I don’t want anything else to eat or drink but, well, I wanted to talk to you. Um, please.” Harry blinked in surprise and motioned for her to continue. “I just, see, I –” She took a deep breath. “I really wanted to apologize to you. For what I said when I met you last year at Hogwarts. I was wrong to, to judge you like that.” Her brow furrowed in much the same way as Hermione’s did when she was upset, he noted absently. “And I wanted to say that last spring I – I didn’t know as much about what happened to you, but now I do, and I think it’s wrong that the Ministry would put you on trial and almost give you the Kiss just because you defended yourself against a Death Eater!” The words tumbled out in a rush, and then the girl looked around as if expecting the others in the pub to oppose her.

Perhaps surprised that no one had screamed something like “how dare you say such a thing!,” Lily continued in a less strident voice. “Anyway. I just wish I hadn’t treated you like that. I want … I want to be better than those who, well do. Like that absolute shit – I mean, jerk Dorbel. That’s all. So I’m sorry.”

A soft, almost parental, feeling of pride welled up in Harry. “Thanks … It’s actually really nice to hear that,” was all he said in the end. She beamed at him.

A wicked little smile crossed Harry’s face. “And as for Dorbel, don’t worry about him. That absolute *shit* is on borrowed time anyway.” At her puzzled look, he explained. “Haven’t you noticed you have a new Defense teacher just about every year? Most are sure the position’s cursed. We even have a bit of a flutter going on about how he takes his leave of the school.” He gestured towards the wall behind her and her eyes widened as she took in the now-hundreds of possible odds and bets. “You’re *gambling* on him?” she exclaimed, aghast. “That’s – that’s … well, that’s actually kind of brilliant.” Her eyes scanned the bets. “Auto-erotic asphyxiation? Really?” Harry huffed a little laugh. “And the leading bet is that he’s taken out by an enraged teenaged squib?”

Harry pulled a scowl. “That one’s *not* mine. Can’t believe it’s still the top choice.”
Lily snickered as she pulled a galleon out of her purse. “Do you think you could put me down for the ‘house elf revolutionary enslavement’ one?”

He’d been taking a sip of water and nearly spit it out his nose. “Promise you won’t tell?”

Confused, she nodded.

“That’s Professor McGonagall’s wager,” he revealed with relish. “It really is supposed to be anonymous, but…”

Lily’s loud laugh cut him off. “Well if the Professor is going for it, I definitely want in!”

Harry smiled as he took her galleon and promised to have Wig and Pel mark down her wager.

The redhead’s laughter subsided and she slowly adopted a more serious expression. “Um, Harry, I… I did come here to apologize to you, but I also came because I was kind of hoping to talk to the old man who runs this place about, well, about something.”

“Ab? Mum wants to talk to Ab? Now that’s unexpected.”

“Well, he’s out for the day. I can give him a message if you want.”

Lily worried her lip. “I don’t know. Maybe … See, I’m not even sure if he’s the right person to talk to. It’s just …”

Green eyes met green eyes as she gave him a long, searching look.

“See, I don’t know if you know it, but on Leaving Day last year some Muggle-borns’ families were attacked. I think the Ministry chalked it up to Muggle-on-Muggle violence, but that’s just such lies. Well … there was this fifth year Gryffindor I was friendly with, and she wrote me a letter. She’s at Beauxbatons now, and she said that some people helped smuggle her and her family out of the country when she got off the train. She said, well, she said one of them looked like ‘the old man who ran the Hog’s Head.’”

Harry’s face had grown stiff and hard. People were not supposed to know the identities of the Platform Nine team. Ab’s glamour must have slipped at some point. Shite.

“Come with me. Now.”

Without waiting for an answer he firmly took her arm and nearly man-handled her down the stairs and into the stable.

She looked at him in shock, but he snapped, “Go on with what you were saying.”

Obviously apprehensive about Harry’s reaction, Lily continued much more nervously. “I … I don’t mean to … I mean, I was hoping if it was him who helped, that maybe I could convince him to take my parents out of the country. I can stay with my boyfriend (oh my God, is she with Dad now?) or my friend Marlene over break and this summer, but my parents … they’re defenseless against magic
and I can’t bear the thought of something happening to them!” She looked near tears. “Please, if you can help or you know someone who can … I’m just so scared.”

Shite. Harry swelled in sudden, furious worry for Ab and the others in the group.

“Dammit! Look, hypothetically speaking, people are not supposed to know about any of this. Your friend put a ton of people in real fucking danger writing you about it. That stupid, stupid girl!” He kicked at some hay and took a few deep breaths. “And I understand why you came here, but you cannot just start talking about it in public, do you understand?”

Lily nodded quickly and Harry sat down on his hay bed with a heavy sigh.

“Okay. Still speaking in hypotheticals, if I know contacts for this … group, I could get you in touch with them so you can see if they’re interested in helping.”

The girl let out a strangled sob of relief.

“But.” Harry stared hard at his teenaged quasi-mother. “But, and I really, really mean this, if you work with them you cannot tell anyone. Not your boyfriend, not your friends, not the headmaster. In fact, given what your idiotic friend did, they might not be willing to help.”

“But the headma –”

“Fuck the headmaster.” Harry when shocked to realize he thoroughly meant what he said. “The headmaster is a great man, I know, but this just isn’t his business. Period. If you can’t handle that, I’ll knock you out right now and have Aberforth Obliviate you when he gets back.”

*What the fuck am I saying? There’s no way I can do that, right? Christ, what I am doing?*

Lily looked as if she’d been slapped. Harry let out a frustrated breath. “Lily, this is war. But it isn’t a war between side one and side two. There’s lots of other people involved, people risking *everything.* I’m guessing that if they believe they can trust you, they’ll risk their lives to help your family. But you can’t just ask for someone’s help and not be prepared to help protect them in turn.”

Lily nodded again, and this time met his eyes. “I understand. I’ll take vows if that’s what they want. I don’t like not telling James – he’s my boyfriend – or my friends, but I understand.” She tentatively placed her hand on top of his. (*My mum is touching me. She’s touching me.*) “Thank you, Harry.”

He gave a jerky shrug of his shoulders. “I’m not sure how contact will work. But if you get a letter or some sort of communication, it *must* include the phrase ‘Platform Nine.’ If it doesn’t, it’s not from us. If that happens, I dunno, just send me a note asking how I am or something. I’ll know what you mean.”

She smiled hesitantly, then started in surprise when Goat approached and unceremoniously took in a large mouthful of fiery red hair.

“Don’t mind her,” Harry shrugged. “She does that.”
That evening Harry received yet another visitor.

*My social calendar is positively bustling,* he thought wryly.

Auror Alice bounced into the pub heedless of the looks that some of the dodgier patrons cast at her. Harry smiled tightly. He’d seen her a few times since pretending his mind was boggled, and his temper had cooled in the interim. *We can be friendly,* he had decided, *as long as I don’t forget I’m not a priority for her.*

“Hiya Harry!” she beamed. “I know, I know, it’s not the day for my official visit, but I figured we could do it now and then I could tell you my news!” Without waiting for an answer she got him to verify that he was still abiding by the terms of his parole (*yes wizards are just absolutely brilliant and I’m so very lucky they tolerate my existence*) and then thrust her left hand into his face so hard she nearly took out his eye.

“See? See?!”

“Er –”

She growled. “The *ring,* Harry. The *ring!*”

He looked at her hand. *Yes, there is a ring there … “It’s … nice?”*

The Auror hissed at him.

*What? What did I do? I said it was nice!*

“Merlin’s sake, it’s an *engagement ring,* you idiot! Frank proposed! I’m getting married!”

Pel, Dalcop, and some of the other patrons brightened. “Well, I’d say this calls for a round in congratulations, young lady!” Peloother grinned.

Alice looked taken aback, but nothing could stop her ebullience. “What the hell? Sure, a round for everyone!”

Harry got to work pouring shots of Firewhiskey for the bar and then couldn’t stop his grin as the entire Head toasted the upcoming nuptials of an Auror.

*Seriously, how often does that happen?*

Alice wasn’t smiling when he put out his hand for money. “Hey, you called the round, Auror Alice, it’s on you.”

“Aw, ruddy hell,” came the sudden voice of a returning Ab. “She ain’t half a bastard. This one’s on the house.”
As the pub calmed down and the patrons returned to their own conversations, Alice informed Harry that the wedding would be in late June. She suddenly looked rather uncomfortable. “I’m, well, I’m really sorry, but I can’t invite you.”

Harry hadn’t even thought she would invite him.

“Don’t worry about it, Alice.”

“No, I really wanted to,” she rushed on headlong. “It’s just Frank’s mum is pretty superstitious and, well, you know they say it’s bad luck to have a squib at the wedding.”

“Well of course they do.”

“I said don’t worry about it. This gets me out of having to buy you a gift, right?”

She laughed and smacked the back of his head. “Don’t bet on it. I can’t wait to point to some ugly vase or tea cup or whatnot and tell my future children that ‘Harry the crazy squib murderer’ got it for me.”

“I’ll make sure whatever I get you is appropriately horrendous, in that case.”

Ab wasn’t nearly as happy later that night when Harry summarized his conversation with Lily. “Ruddy stupid little bint” was about the nicest thing the man had to say about his quasi-mother’s loose-lipped friend. At first the old man seemed ready to dismiss Lily’s plea and somehow memory-charm her so she couldn’t divulge his identity to anyone.

He stopped when he saw Harry’s face.

“I … I thought about that too, right from the off. But …”

“People are riskin’ their lives here, lad! We need to protect our own.”

Harry toed the floor awkwardly. “Yeah, yeah I know. It’s just that,” he chanced a glance at Ab, “well, that’s pretty much what the headmaster thought when he Obliviated me.” Harry really didn’t want to think about how much his own reactions mirrored Dumbledore’s.

Outrage clouded over the older man’s features, but Harry stared at him unapologetically.

“Besides that, she’s my mum, Ab. Or the closest I’ll ever get to my mum.”

Harry wasn’t sure what words he could use to make this work out.

“Please. Please help her.”
He hadn’t intended to speak with Ab about all this in the upstairs sitting room, but the expectant look on Ariana’s face definitely helped his cause. The old man cringed when she arched her brow.

“Fine! Fine. I’ll write to her. See if I can set somethin’ up. But she better not be as stupid as I expect her to be. Dating Potter!” he growled. “Can’t be all that bright a lass.”

Harry knew that growl. It was a growl that translated to “I’m really irritated but you are going to get your way, so shove off.”

“Thanks Ab. I mean it. And make sure you mention Platform Nine – I told her it was a codeword.”

Ab raised his eyes heavenward. “‘A ‘course you did, Merlin. Go study or somethin’ that ain’t ‘round me.”

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**22 November, 1977**

Dabbling in the world of illicit magical manufacturing and distribution was not shaping up to be as exciting as Harry had expected.

He sighed and went back to the little pieces of metal he’d slowly grown to loathe over the last few hours.

*This is going to take forever.*

While he wouldn’t admit it to anyone else, he’d been almost bouncing with anticipation when Myrtle Cramer arrived at the pub that morning to take him to his first day as a member of the British magical criminal underworld. A very excited voice inside his head kept chanting *‘this is so cool, this is so cool, this is so cool!*’

The voice continued burbling happily as Myrtle apparated him to a nondescript urban industrial neighborhood (though it paused for a moment as Harry fought not to vomit), as she led him into a large windowless warehouse that looked exactly like he would expect an illegal operation would use, and as she used her wand to flip on the low fluorescent lighting that illuminated shelf after shelf of boxes containing … well, Harry was sure it was interesting, whatever it was.

His excited inner voice had reached a crescendo after she had sat him down at a metal worktable next to a giant map that literally pulsed with magic. Sitting by the wicked map seemed a distinct sign that he was totally involved with the operation. He almost stopped himself from preening until he realized that there was no one else around to see him do so.

*This is so cool, this is so cool, this is so cool!*

“All right, Harry dear. This is your job. See these sets of dog tags?” She had held up two standard-issue metal dog tags.

“Well, we’re pairing them together magically and selling them to Muggle-borns and their families. A
magical can give their Muggle relative the companion dog tag that has the number ‘9’ engraved on it. We’re charming the sets so that if a relative gets attacked, all they need to do is press their fingers to either side of the tag and say ‘help.’ The magical’s tag will get hot and let them know to get their arses to their family. Not the best alarm system, I know, but at least it’s something.”

Harry had been impressed, but deflated a little. Enchanting necklaces wasn’t exactly what he’d been picturing doing. “And *this* is illegal?”

Myrtle let out a tinkling laugh. “Of course. Though the Ministry likes to wax poetic about our duty to protect the Muggles from this war, they don’t actually do anything much and certainly don’t intend to relax their policies about Muggles and magical devices. It’s against a number of lovely little laws to enchant anything for Muggles to use, let alone *sell* them anything magic.”

She plopped down next to him. “At any rate, we need you to do the enchanting. It’s isn’t all that difficult, just four layered charms embedded in a certain order into the metal.”

Grabbing a sheet of Muggle notebook paper and a biro, Myrtle walked him through the ‘not all that difficult’ series of charms. First he’d have to cast a Protean Charm on both dog tags in a set, then something called *Vox Familiae*, which he gathered was some sort of voice-touch activation charm that could link family members. This was to be followed by *Calescere*, a warming charm that would make the metal heat up, and finally a nifty little spell called *Contego Incantatem* which could mute the magic in the tags so as not to garner unnecessary Ministry attention.

By the time Myrtle had finished explaining the four new charms he’d have to master and the way to apply them to the metal, Harry was seriously considering just coming out as a wizard. *Simple charming my arse! This – I don’t even understand half of this!*

“No to worry, dear. Today I’ll just have you practice until you can do them correctly!” Harry did not find Myrtle’s enthusiasm infectious.

After a few hours of accidentally melting, duplicating, exploding, and, in one memorable accident, somehow tattooing the dog tags onto his own skin – and thank Merlin that effect was temporary – Harry had finally produced a charmed tag that Myrtle happily deemed a “better failure.”

“You just have to work on your timing, Harry. Remember, you have to wait *exactly* four minutes and twenty-five seconds after casting the *Vox Familiae* to imbue the warming charm; if you don’t, well, *boom!”*

“Yeah, I got that one. Thanks,” the teenager had grumbled as he patted down his smoldering hair. “Aren’t you going to help make them?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p.’ “God knows I don’t want to be stuck doing this grunt work. When we finally figured out how to do them, I knew that it’d take forever for each set.”

Harry glared as Myrtle smirked and ambled over to her own workstation. That’s why she was so eager to have a little helper. Goddammit.

And so here he sat, looking down at an even better failure than his previous set.

*I’m never casting a warming charm again after this.*
With bleary eyes and a languid hand he was about to move on to his next attempt when Myrtle headed over with two men in tow.

Harry cursed silently to himself and made to stow his wand.

“Oh, don’t worry about them, Harry dear.”

Harry was not reassured as he stared at her companions, a hulking man covered in tattoos and sporting a thick 1970s-style chevron mustache and a tall, thin redhead whom he recognized as being at the pub the day he met Myrtle. What was his name? … He couldn’t recall, but looking at the two, especially the big one, he rather hoped their names were something cliché, like Spike and Tiny, or Boris and Red Jimmy.

“Harry, these are my colleagues Dwight and Clark,” (Dwight and Clark?! Harry had to bite back his sudden disappointment), “don’t worry about them seeing you do magic. Dwight here,” the big tattooed man grunted, “is a Muggle and doesn’t give much of a shit about, well, anything, and Clark is a squib who’s signed a binding secrecy agreement with me. He literally can’t tell a soul about you.” The redhead gave him a cold nod and didn’t look him in the eye.

“Anyhow,” Myrtle continued, oblivious to the awkward reception, “Dwight’s here to help me with a little something, and Clark does our books. He’s going to set you up on payroll.”

As Clark pulled a ledger out of his battered leather case, Myrtle began speaking quietly with Dwight. Harry barely listened as the redhead quickly laid out his pay rates and asked if he preferred Muggle or magical currency. His eyes drooped and he just wanted to take a nap after all the enchanting.

They snapped open when he felt a shield suddenly cast around him.

“Don’t worry, Harry!” Myrtle called. “It’s perfectly safe, and this is for science, after all!”

And then Dwight pulled out a gun and fired in Harry and Clark’s general direction.

The shield glowed momentarily as a bullet hit it.

“What the ever-living-fuck!?” Harry screamed. What the fuck? What the fuck? They shot at me!

Myrtle barely glanced in his direction. “Just an experiment for another product, dear.” She cast a spell that seemed to illuminate the bullet’s trajectory and frowned. “Damn, still not good enough. Definitely needs tweaking.”

Dwight grunted and laid the pistol on a table.

“Huh?” Harry’s hands were shaking. Wizards don’t use guns! They’re pointless for us! He shook his head quickly. What the hell is she playing at?

Everyone else in the room seemed entirely unconcerned about the goings-on.
“If I could have your attention, please?” Clark asked in a peeved voice. He pushed his wire glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I was asking if you had questions regarding the amount or method of dispersal of your pay?”


The redhead cocked an eyebrow at the respectful appellation. “Well, that is settled then. All monies earned working for this organization will, naturally, not be subjected to magical or Muggle taxes, so do be careful to avoid incurring an audit, as we will not supply any written records confirming or denying your pay.”

Harry thought about informing the man he didn’t even know how to pay taxes, but figured it might make him look even sillier. Instead he pulled what he felt was a very adult expression and murmured “Of course,” while keeping a wary eye on the pistol across the room.

“Well, that concludes our business. If you do have questions pertinent to accounting, please inform Mrs. Cramer and she will contact me.” The man gave him a final cold look and stood.

I wonder if he hates me because I pretended to be a squib. Like I’ve insulted him or something … He considered apologizing or trying to explain, but the redhead, who every minute reminded him more of Percy Weasley in terms of both appearance and demeanor, didn’t seem to want to engage with him more than necessary.

Myrtle thankfully interrupted the uncomfortable moment. “Boys? Hello, Prewett? You done with Harry yet? I need to take his little bottom home soon or Ab’ll do his nut.”

A few minutes later and Harry had been apparated home. He stood in the scullery and winced at the mound of dishes Ab had left him from cooking the stew for that evening. Well, this might be better than enchanting dog tags and getting shot at with a Muggle gun. Maybe.

Sighing, Harry got to work, silently lamenting the hours of tediousness punctuated by moments of pure terror that apparently came hand in glove with entry-level positions in the exciting world of criminal enterprise.

10 December, 1977

The last few weeks had been a whirlwind of activity, and Harry couldn’t imagine having been able to get done all he needed to if his service to wizards at Hogwarts hadn’t ended. In addition to helping Ab and Quisby run the Head, he’d spent a few days a week enchanting dog tags after he finally managed to get the process down.

These had really better save some people’s lives, Harry would grumble to himself as he hunkered down for the exhausting and mind-numbingly boring task of mass producing enchanted objects by hand.
The rest of his time had been taken up with ever-more frantic studying. For the first time in his life, someone else actually cared how he did academically – even if Ab said it didn’t much matter to him, Harry knew better – and he gingerly cherished the idea of making the old man proud, as well as Pel and Madame Pomfrey.

Indeed, the latter had been absolutely furious the week before when he informed her why he wouldn’t be able to come in to work for the next two Mondays.

“You’re – you’re taking your O.W.L.s? Next week?” she had said, her tone going from a whisper to a near-shriek.

Harry cringed when her voice went up an octave. That had always been a bad sign with Hermione.

“Why the blazes didn’t you tell me, young man!?”

_Oh no, she brought out the heavy curse words and the ‘young man.’ This will not end well._

He had stuttered some honest nonsense about how he hadn’t even thought of it, and that he had in fact been revising everything she had taught him.

“You – you – you!” She was nearly spitting. “I could have helped you! I could have helped you more, gone over how to approach the exams, how to formulate and structure written responses, how to time yourself appropriately, how to –”

Harry’s face fell. He hadn’t thought of things like timing himself. _Is that something I need to do?_

“Oh Merlin, Harry,” Pomfrey had moaned. “Well, there’s nothing for it now but to wish you good luck. However,” the hand on his shoulder suddenly clawed into him, “if you decide to ever take your NEWTs, you are going to tell me far in advance. Do you understand me?”

He had nodded mutely, eyes wide, and vowed to himself that he would get her something nice while he was in Belgium.

And now he was on his way, he thought as he stood at a nearly-deserted dock in the city of Hull. The night wind was beating across the waves and freezing him to the bone as he looked up at the giant ship that was set to take him to his O.W.L.s.

_It’s an actual bloody pirate ship._

The looming vessel reminded him sharply of the Durmstrang ship, though this one was smaller, less skeletal, and had black flags sporting the traditional Jolly Rogers that any Muggle child would immediately recognize as denoting a pirate vessel.

The flags were a bit much, Harry thought.

He had waited out of sight off the dock while the four Muggle-born families also traveling to Belgium were escorted onto the ship. Ab had been clear that they weren’t to see his face until after Captain Burke had cast a glamour on him. That Burke would be choosing the glamour left him more than a little nervous.
“You Harry?” a gruff voice asked.

Harry turned to find a tall man with dark eyes and a chiseled jaw covered with stubble peering at him. The man’s Muggle denims and thick nautical parka seemed distinctly unmagical, putting Harry on his guard.

“Who’s asking?”

Chiseled Jaw smiled. “Name’s Peadar, Peadar Burke. Captain of the Elizabeth here. I believe you’re acquainted with my little brother Caffrey, yeah?”

Harry stared. He wouldn’t have expected the younger Burke’s brother to be so … so normal. “Er, yeah, sorry Captain Burke. I had thought he’d be taking us, so you just surprised me, that’s all.”

The man gave him a grin that lacked any hint of sexual innuendo. “Sorry to disappoint you,” he quipped, then laughed at Harry’s obvious relief. “Caff can be such a dramatic little ponce, I know. I’ve always thought he needs to lose some teeth or an eye, learn some humility. Anyhow, I’m going to cast a glamour on you, and then we can get on board. You’re set to go to Belgium with this lot, yeah? But you’re supposed to take the Muggle ferry back in a few weeks?”

Harry nodded. “I know you and your brother won’t be around for my return, but thanks for helping me out. And the others.”

Burke laughed his easy laugh again. “No need to thank me, kid. I’m getting well paid for this little run.” He cast a weather eye on Harry. “Bit of an odd voyage you’re taking. Can you tell me about it?”

The younger wizard bristled. “Yeah. I could.”

Several silent beats later, Peadar grinned in approval. “Come on, let’s get you glamoured, get you on board, and I’ll show you around my girl.”

Twenty minutes later a blond, slightly older looking Harry was being escorted by the elder Captain Burke around the ship’s holds as the crew of sea-bedraggled men and women readied the ship to depart from port.

“Now we just dropped off a haul of South American produce in London, so we’ll be looking in the next few days to find some Muggle transports to restock. For now, we’re just taking you and those other folks to the continent, and dropping off a small load of goodies for the Muggle-born there, and some others.”

“Goodies?”

The captain smirked. “Well, Mrs. Cramer mentioned you knew about the new tags?” Harry nodded. “Neat little things, they are. Got a few dozen sets ready to go for buyers on the continent.” He opened a case filled with the metal necklaces that were beginning to patrol Harry’s dreams.

“Then there’s these beauties.” He opened another case and Harry started.
Burke laughed. “Yeah, I know what you’re thinking. What good are bullets against wizards, right? But these are special, modified ones Cramer invented. They’ve got a series of charms in them that let them target enemies. So as long as a Muggle points in the general direction of a Death Eater, they’ll shoot true, even if the person has shit aim.”

Harry gaped. That’s – these – these are based on my rocks! Cramer stole my idea!

The other man misunderstood Harry’s open mouth as a reflection of his awe. “Now I know they sound amazing, but of course they’re as worthless as other bullets if the wizard raises a shield. Still, we’re thinking that most of the Death Eaters aren’t expecting much from Muggle targets, so hopefully they can get off a few good shots and maybe save their lives before the bastards wise up.” Burke smiled and fingered one of the bullets. “They work nicely with the dog tags. Call your relative for help, then shoot, and hope like hell that help comes before it’s too late.”

A curl of trepidation unfurled in Harry’s stomach. They’re using my idea to arm Muggles against wizards. He definitely wanted to help those who were helpless against magic, but the idea of creating weapons that could be mass-produced and used against wizards … This could become something really dangerous. Flashes of how much people like Uncle Vernon would love such power appeared in his mind, and he felt suddenly nauseated.

“Hey, don’t look like that!” Burke said, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “If you’re worried about them being used against wizards in general, don’t be. Remember, all they do is make the shooter have great aim. They can’t tear through shields, so they’re no more dangerous to wizarding folk than a well-trained Muggle soldier.”

That’s true. Harry gave a jerky nod, though he intended to get Ab’s opinion on all this.

“Then there’s these, which go along quite well with the bullets,” Burke continued and opened a huge case filled with plastic Muggle bottles. They were all labeled with a loud, commercial-looking design proclaiming them Eazy-Klean! and filled with an acid green liquid.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

Okay, say you’re a Muggle or a squib and you’ve just been attacked by a wizard. You managed to shoot him with one of the targeted bullets, and now he’d be just a bad memory if not for the fact that his body is currently gracing your parlor floor. What do you do? You can’t call the Muggle authorities and say you killed a man because he pulled a stick on you. If they found out, the DMLE or a continental equivalent would probably – well, I guess I don’t have to tell you how’d they react. Enter these totally innocuous-looking ‘cleaners.’ They’re actually filled with a standard Shrinking Solution. All you need do once you’ve dispatched your enemy is spray him with the potion. It’s designed to shrink the corpse down to the size of a small doll for a few hours, leaving you to easily convey it to the body disposal site of your choice.”

Wicked,” Harry breathed. “And you’re just selling all this stuff to Muggle-born families who’re running from Voldemort?”

Burke nodded. “It’s more complicated than that, but that’s the essentials. What with all the recent attacks, they’re willing to pay top dollar.”
Harry’s eyes widened. “What attacks? I haven’t heard about them being up to anything.” He frowned. “I actually haven’t anything about them at all for a while now, come to think of it.”

“Well who cares about Muggles and Muggle-born in the muggle world being systematically murdered?” came a bitter, feminine voice. Harry turned around to see a youngish woman with strawberry blond hair and the beginnings of frown lines.

“Ah, Harry,” Burke intervened, “meet my first mate, Amber Satchmo. Satchmo, this is Harry. He works with Cramer.”

The woman nodded stiffly when Harry smiled at her. “Captain, we’ll be ready to leave British waters in about ten minutes.” She turned and left without another word.

“She’s angry about it, but she’s right, kid. Last few months there’s been dozens, maybe hundreds for all we know, of attacks on Muggle-born and their families in Britain, Ireland, and even in some places on the continent. Prophet doesn’t care enough to report on it, so most think we’ve reached a lull in the war.” He sighed. “We haven’t. Just the ‘right sort’ aren’t dying right now.”

The cupboard under the stairs, Harry thought, had been good training for sleeping on a pirate ship. He had his own cabin, though concluded that the word was being used euphemistically. The room was literally large enough for a half-width single bed and himself – if he stood on one leg, that was. On the other hand, the ceiling art definitely reminded him that he was indeed on a wizarding vessel. Some thoughtful soul had papered the area with photos of nubile young witches pulling poses and doing … things, things that Harry would have thought were physically impossible. He felt distinctly uncomfortable trying to fall asleep with that many naked women – even two-dimensional ones – leering down at him and trying ever more, ahem, creative ways of getting his attention.

Unexpected ceiling pornography notwithstanding, the voyage would only take about nine hours, four or five hours less than the Muggle ferry he’d be taking on this same route back. Captain Burke had observed that they could do the run in less than half that time if they fully submerged, but apparently no magic could really lift the biting chill of the North Atlantic in winter, and staying above the waves kept the ship warmer. Huddling deep into his tight little nest of blankets, Harry soon fell into a restless slumber, his instincts wanting him to awake with every creak of the ship’s timbers.

. . . . .


Harry bolted awake at the thunderous sound as a grey, icy dawn settled over the sea between Britain and mainland Europe.

What the hell? He blinked in confusion as what he realized was Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” played on a loop at top volume from out of nowhere. Why in the world …?

– FROM THE MIDNIGHT SUN WHERE THE HOT SPRINGS FLOW –

Yawning and still not having found those sea legs Peadar Burke swore anyone could obtain, he stumbled above decks as Robert Plant once again informed everyone aboard that he and his men were driving their ship to new lands. A few pirates sang along as they busied themselves with sails
and hawsers, but there were no other passengers up on the decks yet except for a slender blonde woman standing at a rail near the bow’s forecastle. Harry hadn’t planned on approaching her, but she turned, smiled, and waved him over.

**VALHALLA I AM COMING …**

The woman seemed to be in her late forties or early fifties, but her blue eyes sparkled like those of a much younger woman. “Good morning!” she called loudly over the sound of the waves’ salt spray and a screaming lead singer. “I asked about the music – they pipe it through the ship as an alarm clock!” She grinned. “Zeppelin’s a nice touch for pirates, I suppose, don’t you think?”

Harry smiled politely and nodded, not sure what to say to the woman.

“Another refugee, I presume?” Halfway through her shouted question the music abruptly cut off and he caught only a hint of bitterness in the woman’s otherwise friendly voice. She continued at a more normal volume. “Are you travelling alone? Do you have family meeting you in Europe?”

He scratched his eyebrow. “Not a refugee, ma’am, no. And yes, I’m alone. I have to go to Belgium for … things. I’m coming back in a few weeks.”

She leaned on the rail and peered at him. “So, you’re magical then? My youngest daughter’s a witch. She, well, she rather strenuously convinced us to leave our home because of all your world’s … whatever it is.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I – what I am is a little complicated, I guess. But it’s probably best that you’re leaving. I know it’s probably horrible to have to do, but if your daughter’s a known Muggle-born, there’s every chance they would come after you.”

The blonde’s eyebrow quirked when he evaded her first question. “Man of mystery, I see,” she murmured. “Is it – is it really so bad? Really?”

He moved next to her at the railing. “Yeah. Yeah it is. I think maybe dozens of Muggles and Muggle-borns, maybe even a lot more, have been killed so far, but the Muggle authorities probably don’t know about it, and honestly the magical ones just don’t give enough of a damn to even report on their deaths.” He paused and eyed her seriously. “You’re doing the right thing, leaving. Yeah, you might never have been targeted, but better than safe than sorry.”

The older woman looked sad, but seemed to accept his words. “My older daughter just got married last weekend and moved into a brand-new house. I really wanted to help her get settled, but Lily was so adamant …”

Harry nearly choked on his tongue. *Merlin, bloody hell! Lily?* *Ab must have … She’s … This woman is my grandmother! Older daughter … She must be talking about Aunt Petunia!*

“Oh!” he couldn’t help but exclaim much more loudly than he would have liked. The woman looked startled, so he rushed on. “Sorry, I just, um, are you talking about Lily Evans? She’s your daughter?”

The woman grinned. “You know her! Yes, she’s my younger girl. I’m June, June Evans. My husband Harold is still below trying to get some sleep.”

*I’m named after my grandfather.*
“Yeah, I mean, I don’t know her that well or anything, but we’ve met a few times.” He searched for something to say. “She’s nice. I – I’m glad you’re leaving Britain.”

Her smile turned wistful. “Yes … A whole new life, maybe, at least for awhile. And we aren’t getting younger.” June clapped her hands. “’Ah well, never thought I’d be moving to the continent on a pirate ship of all things to escape a magical war, so at least it’s exciting!” Harry laughed. “But, I’d best go see if I can roust my Harry out of bed. The crew said we’re due to land in less than an hour and I suspect as soon as the racket stopped he just rolled back over.”

She gave him a little wave and then disappeared under the decks.

She seemed … really nice, Harry thought with a small smile, and went back to looking out over the sea.

I have no idea when or how they died. Was it Death Eaters? An accident? No one ever told me, and I never asked … It had to have been before mum and dad though, or I wouldn’t have been left at Petunia’s.

The waves glittered in the pale morning sun.

What if … what if things are different here because of me? In my world, Lily wouldn’t have known how to get her family out of Britain … she wouldn’t have known me, wouldn’t have been contacted by Ab.

His stomach fluttered with a strange sort of hope and a sliver of pride.

Maybe they’ll live through the war this time.

As he continued staring out at the grey-blue expanse, a thought suddenly struck him, and he took off at a near-run for the ship’s cargo holds, eyes peeled for Captain Burke. He found the man just entering the storage bays.

“Captain, sir!” The elder Burke brother started at his sudden entrance in surprise. “I know you’re probably busy sir, but I would really like to purchase a set of the dog tags. Please. But I, well, I don’t have nearly enough money with me, I’m sure … is there maybe any way I could pay you later or have Myrtle take it out of my pay and give it to you?”

The man arched an eyebrow, but nodded.

With a grin of thanks, Harry grabbed a set and hightailed it above decks, slipping on the unmarked tag and keeping his eyes peeled for his grandmother.

About ten minutes before they pulled into Zeebruge he spied her and her husband, a thin man with short-cropped auburn hair, on the other side of the deck.

“Er, excuse me, Mrs. Evans? June?” Harry interrupted as the two watched the Belgian landscape they were swiftly approaching.

“Oh, yes dear? I’m afraid I didn’t ask your name.”

Harry paused. “Well, ma’am, I’m actually not supposed to say … safety and all. I’m even wearing a glamour.” At her puzzled look and his grandfather’s stern frown, Harry explained. “It’s a spell that
alters my appearance so that people can’t recognize me if they see me later.”

His grandfather grunted in disapproval, his green eyes flashing. “All this cloak and bloody dagger! More than normal folks can take!”

_Huh. I have my grandfather’s name and his eyes._

Harry mentally shook his head and plowed on. “I’m sorry to interrupt you,” he repeated, “but I wanted to give you something.” He held up the dog tag. “If one of you wears this, all you need to do if you get attacked is hold it with your fingers on either side like this,” he grasped the tag with the number nine etched on it, “and say ‘help.’ It’ll notify m–people willing to help that you’re in danger.”

June smiled. “That’s a kind thought. Thank you.”

The man was staring at Harry and stopped his wife from accepting the dog tag. “And how do we know we can trust you?”

Harry blinked and thought hard. _That’s a really good question, actually._ “Er, well, I kind of know your daughter. If you want, write to her and ask her about, um, the boy from Platform Nine. That bit’s important. And tell her that he asked you to say ‘hi to This Year’s Head Girl’ from him. Just like that – ‘This Year’s Head Girl.’ She’ll know it’s me and can vouch for me.”

June raised an eyebrow and his grandfather shook his head. “Never thought I’d be going to Belgium talking to wizard spies or whatever you are.” He sighed and grasped the dog tag. “I don’t want this enchanted thing, young man, but we’ll take it. Just in case.”

Harry smiled. “I’m glad sir. I hope you never have to use it.” On a whim, he put out his hand to shake that of his grandfather, who looked grudgingly amused at the gesture. “It was really nice to meet you sir, and you, June. I hope things are okay for you in Belgium, and that you can go home soon.”

“Thank you, dear,” June smiled.

Harry looked one last time at his mother’s parents and retreated to the far side of the boat.

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23 December, 1977

Harry relaxed in a small café by the port in Zeebruge as he waited to board the Muggle ferry that would convey him back to Hull.

The last two weeks had been an exhausting, solitary slog and he was ready to _get the hell home._

After bidding goodbye to the man he now thought of as “Normal Captain Burke,” he’d taken a train to Leuven, the center of wizarding Belgium. Rather than having a set of Alleys like London, Leuven featured an entire magical village hidden in the Muggle city. The Groot Begijnhof was a very old neighborhood from the twelfth century that the Muggles believed only included about a dozen narrow streets. In truth, the wizarding part of the Begijnhof spanned more than thirty additional cobbled lanes upon which were nestled homes, shops, and official buildings looking out over the River Djile.
Harry had stayed in a room at the Boeken en Bieren, a little inn and pub frequented by wizarding academics who studied in the secret magical departments of the Katholieke Universiteit. The bookish clientele was a far cry from what he was used to at the Head. Though the peace and quiet had been helpful at night while he was revising, a detached loneliness had settled over him like a strange sort of Invisibility cloak.

*I’m not used to being alone and unknown anymore,* he had mused one night as he sat in a quiet corner of the inn’s public room, surrounded by strangers. *This feels like I’m in the Forest again.*

On the twelfth of December, the day after his arrival, his O.W.L.s had commenced. History of Magic came first, and he had to smile when he saw the first question:

*Describe the circumstances that led to the formation of the International Confederation of Wizards and explain why the warlocks of Liechtenstein refused to join.*

*Well, Pel did say the Belgians wouldn’t mind a truthful answer …* He had grinned more broadly and started writing immediately.

All in all, he found the exams anticlimactic. Other than Astronomy, which he figured he’d never pass anyway, both the Transfiguration written and practical exams had been the most challenging by far. He’d taken them on his second day, and the practical in particular threw him off. Mostly this was because it was just so *odd* to be doing magic in front of people other than Ab, Pel, and Myrtle, though the strange expectations of his examiners also chafed at him.

His vanishing spell had been perfect, but they’d asked him to do several spells he’d never even heard of. At the last request for some unknown transfiguration, he had actually got into a bit of a tiff with one of his examiners when he failed to turn a rather nervous looking owl into a pair of opera glasses.

Harry had apologized for never having learned the spell, but noted that he couldn’t foresee many situations which would require him to *know* such a limited-use piece of magic, let alone to torture a poor owl by turning it into eyewear.

“Generally, don’t we typically have inanimate things on hand more than animate things?” One of the examiners nodded as the other questioner scowled. “So why don’t you ask about spells that can create animals that have multiple uses instead of one that’s for a situation that just won’t ever *happen*?”

Although the woman scoffed, the male examiner had seemed rather interested, so Harry gave it a shot. “I mean … say you’re in a forest and are attacked by someone.” He turned a wooden chair into a rather awkward large bush. “I could transfigure leaves from the bush into hornets that would both potentially block spells and would likely attack the target.” A few incantations later and a dummy from the other side of the room was suddenly set upon by leaves-turned-hornets. “So I can’t do the owl-to-opera glasses one, but I think I *can* do much more useful things, depending on the situation, ma’am.”

He could only shrug when the woman continued to glare daggers at him, though the male examiner had clapped his hands and said something, apparently positive, in Dutch.

Other than the Muggle Studies exam – which was so out of date Harry actually had some trouble with it – his other exams in Charms, Defense, Creatures, Herbology, and even Potions went fairly well and there were no real surprises. Now, as he prepared to return to Britain, he felt certain he’d
performed well enough, and was desperately looking forward to getting home to the Head for Christmas, almost an officially qualified wizard.

Chapter End Notes

-- With regard to the gun/bullets: this won’t turn into a “Harry uses Muggle weapons to fight war/defeat Voldemort” story at all. The targeting bullets are just a small way to help non-magicals defend themselves, as Burke explains.

--With regard to the dog tags: They are, of course, based on Hermione’s D.A. galleons, though more complicated because Myrtle is a professional. I made them dog tags since I didn’t want Harry to have a sixth year without an enchanted necklace of some sort.

Thanks for reading, and for your comments last week!
XVIII. The Home Front

10 January, 1978

Harry was tidying up the Head on a blustery, snowy Tuesday morning. There were no guests at the inn at the moment, and Tuesdays were typically just as slow as Mondays, so he didn’t expect any lunch guests – or any patrons really – until the regulars started filtering in that afternoon.

He really didn’t need to straighten up much. After the annual Head Christmas Day bash, he, Quisby, and Ab had made short work of the mess (it helped that Harry secretly and liberally used magic for his part this time around), and now the pub was enjoying the post-holiday slump.

It had been another fun Christmas. The day had been as raucous as the year before, even more so, as both Myrtle Cramer and Caffrey Burke had shown up and harassed poor Harry with a charmed sprig of mistletoe that followed him around and made wildly inappropriate comments at the most inopportune moments. Panty Wacco, the Welsh vampire who had groped him the year before, looked most put out and sent seething glares their way all evening.

For Harry, there had been two highlights of the day. The first was when an intoxicated Hagrid became convinced that it was actually New Year’s Eve and planted a very wet kiss on the old white- and purple-haired crone at the stroke of midnight.

His exuberant but misplaced affections proved unwelcome.

The stench from his burning beard had filled the pub for days, no matter how much Ab cast freshening charms, and Harry still couldn’t look at a clean-shaven Hagrid without giggling. While he had been deeply apologetic to the old woman, the half-giant was thoroughly disconsolate about his unexpected makeover. Apparently most of his creatures didn’t recognize him and kept trying to attack the poor man.

Ariana’s reaction to Harry’s Christmas gift for her had been the other high point. He hadn’t thought to get her something last year (really, who buys presents for portraits?), but this year he had cobbled together enough money to purchase a complete set of the Chronicles of Narnia series that he had found in a used bookstore in Leuven. The girl had been absolutely thrilled, and wouldn’t stop dancing through the various paintings in the Head. (Yarda Gobermouch and one of her ‘friends’ had not been pleased that their transaction had been interrupted by a heedless, pirouetting portrait.) No gift Harry had ever bought anyone had elicited such a dramatic reaction, and his grin felt like it would split his face.

Now, however, he was a little less thrilled, since Ariana demanded that he read her at least a chapter a day.

Why did the series have to be seven books long? he lamented to himself as he scraped some nastiness off the leg of a barstool.

Just as he heard Ab tromp down the stairs, two owls flew into the pub through the little owl flap in
the far corner of the ceiling.

“Post today?” the old man asked in some surprise and grabbed the two envelopes from the owls. Usually the Head got very little in the way of mail. Harry tossed each of the birds a few treats from the small jar on the bar and the owls quickly departed.

“Both for you, lad.”

Harry blinked in surprise. He never got mail. Even the stuff related to his parole went to his custodian, as apparently squibs couldn’t be trusted with such difficult tasks as opening and reading a letter. Ab shrugged and tossed him the letters, poured himself a cup of tea and started rifling through the Prophet.

The top envelope was a pleasant cream parchment with Mr. Harry – The Hog’s Head written on it in neat dark violet ink.


Dear Harry,

Thank you again for your Christmas gift. I too am a big fan of Led Zeppelin. I hope that you and your family are all well also. I wish that my boyfriend’s family were in similarly good positions.

All the best,

This Year’s Head Girl

Harry looked fondly at his mother’s handwriting. So she’s saying she heard from her parents and they’re safe. Thank God.

“Care to share?” Ab inquired.

The younger wizard hesitated. This felt very … personal. “No, actually. It’s nothing really important but …”

Ab waved his hand. “Long as it ain’t no love letter. Can’t abide dealin’ with a teenager in love, Merlin help us all.”

“God no, definitely not a love letter … But have you heard about anything happening to the Potters?”

Aberforth furrowed his brow and shook his head, and Harry moved onto the second letter with a frown of concern about his mother’s cryptic message. His full attention, however, was immediately captured by the much larger and thicker envelope, and his breath caught in his throat when he saw the addressee.

Mr. Harry J. Aberforth
The Hog’s Head Pub
Hogsmeade, Scotland

Holy shit, they actually wrote the name down!

Only one sender would address a letter to Harry J. Aberforth.
When Harry had been in Leuven, the official had demanded that he provide a surname, despite the fact that Aberforth had very consciously not given them one when he signed Harry up. Harry had tried to imply that he’d been disowned, but apparently in Belgium wizards couldn’t be cast from their families, so the man had refused to accept “Harry No Surname.” In the end, Harry had simply used the first name that popped into his head, and it seemed the man had faithfully recorded it.

One day I might need a surname. Especially if I come out as a wizard. There are worse things to be than Harry J. Aberforth.

His reflections on his new name suddenly flew from his mind when he realized that he must be holding his OWL results! Ab seemed to suspect the same thing, as he eyed Harry carefully.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the large letter and unfolded the thick parchment.

Dear Mr. Aberforth,

Below are your results for the Ordinary Wizarding Level Examinations, International Version C (Anglophone) which you completed in Leuven on 12 December 1977 through 23 December 1977. Congratulations on your achievement and best of luck in your future studies.

Sincerely,

Laurent L. Leclercq  
Secretary of Education  
Federale magische regering

Pass Grades: O (Outstanding), E (Exceeds Expectations), A (Acceptable)  
Fail Grades: P (Poor), D (Dreadful), T (Troll)

Astronomy: D  
Care of Magical Creatures: O  
Charms: O  
Herbology: O  
History of Magic: O  
Magical Defense: O  
Muggle Studies: A  
Potions: E  
Transfiguration: A (please see enclosed note)

Harry stared at his results.

Bloody hell. I did … really good! Though that Muggle Studies grade is stupid – the test was so out of date and half the questions were incorrect!

Still, five Os! And an E in Potions!

He noticed the parenthetical remark on his Transfiguration results and flipped to the other piece of parchment.
Dear Mr. Aberforth,

There was great disagreement between the two examiners for your practical Transfiguration examination. While one scored you at a D, the other insisted you had earned an O. Given the significant discrepancy, I viewed their memories of the examination and have judged your mastery of the art to be more than adequate for your age, despite your obvious lack of knowledge about non-defensive transfiguration spells and techniques. Thus I have awarded you a passing grade that aligns with the Acceptable you earned on the written portion. However, I advise you to make a much more thorough study of the subject should you wish to pursue it at the NEWT level. While some spells may seem impractical, they are designed to facilitate your mastery of particular aspects of Transfiguration rather than to serve daily use.

Regards,
LL Leclercq

Harry beamed.

“Well?” Ab bit out in irritation. “Are you going to share your results with your teacher or not?!”

“Oh! Sorry Ab. Here.” Harry handed him both pieces of parchment.

A slow smile spread over the old man’s face, a smile that he quickly tried to smother but which kept creeping back. He clapped Harry on the shoulder. “’Bout as I expected, then.”

“Aw, go on old man! I did great!”

The smile was back. “Obviously. S’what I expected. Make sure you show it to Pel when he gets here.” He paused. “And what’s this about Harry J. Aberforth?”

Harry’s smile faltered under a niggle of anxiety. “I – well, I didn’t think it really meant anything, but they said I had to give them a surname, I couldn’t be Harry No Surname for them, and I – I mean, I just had to pick something fast, see, and I should have asked you, I know, but there wasn’t time and then I honestly forgot about it what with Christmas and all and –”

“Oh stop your babblin’. Makes you sound five years old.”

Harry shut his mouth.

“Harry Aberforth, then, is it?” Ab pursed his lips and looked away. “Sounds … well it sounds rather nice, if you ask me.” He snorted. “Too distinguished for folks like us though, so don’t be puttin’ on any airs, Mr. Aberforth, y’hear me?”

“Yeah Ab, I hear you. No airs.”

Aberforth still hadn’t looked back at him. “Well, you go an’ do the dishes or somethin’ yeah? Off with you!”

Harry left, biting back a smile.

Still holding the exam results, Ab traced a finger over Harry’s name. “Harry Aberforth, indeed.” He chuckled softly to himself and tucked the letter into his robe to give back to the lad later.

28 January, 1978
For once the lunch crowd at the Head actually was a true crowd. Apparently the virulent strain of Dragon Pox that had fallen on Britain after the holidays had hit the Three Broomsticks hard, and Rosmerta had had to shutter her doors to care for an ailing Tab Brewster.

Quisby had been alternatively nervous and excited all week that this might finally be his time, to Harry’s great disgust.

It was now a Hogsmeade weekend, and the blustering chill had driven those sensible students who couldn’t tolerate Madame Puddifoot’s to the Head. Ab scowled more deeply with every butterbeer that was ordered by a pubescent customer, and groused that he should have made Quisby come in early.

“Can’t abide servin’ sprogs whose balls haven’t even dropped yet,” he mumbled darkly. “S’a pub, not a ruddy sweetshop.”

Harry was just finishing cashing out a table when he heard a few people take seats at the bar. “Be right with you,” he called over his shoulder.

“Take your time, Harry,” answered a girl’s voice.

Turning, he saw a smiling Lily … along with James Potter and Sirius Black.

Wait – aren’t they banned?

“Black! Potter! You gormless knobs!” Aberforth bellowed. Some of the Hogwarts students unacquainted with the man suddenly looked very nervous. “You got four years or so left on your ban!”

Sirius and James looked at Harry with wide eyes.

What are they looking at me for?

Wait – Do they actually expect me to help them?

Sirius’ expression turned obviously pleading.

Oh. They do. Bugger.

Harry sighed.

“Ab – a moment?”

Harry didn’t wait for the old man to respond but pulled him into the service alcove behind the bar. “I know they’re banned, but can we maybe give them a break or another chance or something?”

Ab glared and Harry floundered.

“Look, I know, I know that they screwed up last year. It was stupid and shitty of them. But … even if they are pricks and morons, it’s my dad and godfather. Kind of, that is. One chance?”

The older man stared at him for a long minute. “Fine! But if word gets ‘round that I’ve gone soft, you’re dealin’ with the extra headaches, you get me?”

Harry nodded and headed back to the bar while Ab thundered off to deliver butterbeers to a table of terrified fourth years.
“So,” Harry smiled at Lily and gave a neutral nod to the boys, “what’ll it be?”

“You’re bloody fearless, mate,” Sirius breathed. James just frowned while Lily beamed.

“Three hot toddies please, Harry.”

“You got it, Miss This Year’s Head Girl.”

James’ frown deepened as his eyes darted between himself and Lily.

Whoa. Wait – does he think I’m flirting with her? Harry almost laughed out loud as he busied himself making their drinks.

When he came back, he quietly addressed Lily. “Hey, thanks for the update.” Despite his low tones, both boys overheard enough to perk up in interest, but Lily waved them off.

Harry paused and then turned to his father, er, father’s dimensional counterpart. “Um, Potter?” James glared. “I, well, I’m – I just wanted to say I was really sorry to hear about your parents.”


Sudden empathy moved Harry. “Toddies are on the house. Just these though, so don’t get crazy.” He tried to smile and moved away to another table, thinking all the while about his paternal grandparents.

A day after his OWL results arrived, the Prophet reported that Fleamont and Euphemia Potter had died in their home a few days earlier, felled by the same sudden and violent bout of Dragon Pox that now coursed through the countryside.

Harry had gone about that day in a daze, unsure how to feel. He didn’t have the best impression of his grandfather and had never even seen Euphemia, but after meeting June and Harold Evans, he keenly felt the sting of lost opportunity. He worried for his father as well. Being an orphan one’s whole life was quite different, he imagined, than one day having a loving family and the next day just … not.

He was roused from his musings by Ab, who beckoned him back to the bar. “Lad, you gotta handle this lot. My brother just sent word that shit’s happenin’ in Diagon and asked me to skulk ‘round Knockturn and try and figure out what’s what.” Without waiting for an answer, he was out the back door.

Lovely. I so wanted to be alone with two dozen needy Hogwarts students. He sighed and got busy fetching sandwiches and still more butterbeers.

Lily, James, and Sirius were finishing their second toddies – which Harry had made quite light; he’d seen enough of how the latter two behaved when drunk last year, thank you very much – when a sudden boom followed by several large crashes echoed through the village, sending every conversation in the Head to a screeching halt.

“Everybody stay where you are,” Harry said just as James called out “Nobody move,” in the same deadly serious voice.

The trio of Gryffindors, wands out, and Harry cautiously opened the main door to the pub. Smoke was billowing all over the town, and screams could be heard all too close to the pub.

Holy shite. This is happening.
Harry shut the door. “Okay, it looks like the village is under attack. No, don’t scream, you idiots!,” he yelled over the sudden din. “Er … how about this … Students fifth year and below, raise your hands.” About half the crowd raised tentative hands into the air. “Okay, you lot, go down this back stairway into the kitchen. When the last of you get in, that person says ‘immediately!’ and defensive wards will come into place, making it a safe room. I don’t care how crammed in you are, you don’t leave until you get an all clear. Go! Now!” The younger students obediently filed towards the door Harry had indicated.

James turned to Harry. “There’s wards on this place, right?”

“Yeah, but only Ab can raise the active ones. And, well,” Harry surveyed the dozen or so upper years still gathered in the public room, “He left. Something’s happening in Diagon too and he went to help.”

Muttered curses and small cries of distress filled the room.

“So it’s up to us then, isn’t it?” James asked the group, eyes calm and hard.

More screams sounded from the village.

“Merlin. Right then. We have to protect the kids here and help the people outside, right guys?” James said, running an anxious hand through his hair.

“Why don’t you have some people get students on the west side of town back to Hogwarts through the trap door in Honeydukes, and another group try to evacuate those on this side through the Shrieking Shack?” Harry suggested. “And some people can stay here and protect the younger students.”

Sirius and James goggled at Harry. “How the fuck do you know about – ” Sirius started to say, but James interrupted him.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s good. Okay. Me, Lily, Vana – a girl Harry vaguely recognized from the year before nodded – and … you, Featherwaite,” an older looking boy in a Hufflepuff scarf looked up, “we’ll take the Honeydukes side. Sirius, you and three others can take the Shack.”

Sirius looked hesitant to break away from his friends, but he and James were the only two who knew the passages’ locations. The fact that three very pretty girls volunteered to accompany him perked his spirits up considerably.

Two others were stationed as guards by the door of the kitchen, while the last two Ravenclaws were sent to the barn to start casting every temporary warding charm they knew.

“What about me?” Harry asked as the students readied themselves.

As one the other teenagers turned and stared.

“Oh, er – look, kid …” James started awkwardly.

Harry shook his head in frustration. “I don’t see anyone else here who’s actually fought Death Eaters!”

Sirius huffed and Lily sighed apologetically. Harry’s flaring temper abruptly cooled.

_Honestly, I wouldn’t want to go into a fight with squib. They would be a liability. Fuck._
“Never mind. Fine,” he bit out tersely. “Go … and be safe, okay?”

They went.

Harry looked around the suddenly deserted public room feeling lost.

A crash of spells resounded somewhere outside.

*Bugger this. I have to do something.*

Everything in Harry cried for him to go out into the battle anyway, to somehow make sure his parents and Sirius and all the others made it through whatever battles they were about to face.

*But there’s kids here. Little kids. He wanted to kick a wall. The older students can probably protect them … but what if they can’t?*

His shoulders squared.

*The Head’s my home. My job’s here today.*

Decision made, he turned to go up the stairs to the second story, but one of the students sent to guard the kitchen – a pretty strawberry-blonde girl in a Slytherin scarf – came up from the back.

“Where are you going? You should get into the kitchen so we can keep you safe!” The girl admonished.

Harry stopped himself from rolling his eyes. “This is my house. I know its secrets, okay? You go protect them, and I swear I can cover the front doors.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but another burst of spellfire sounded and she only gave him a wary nod before heading back down the stairs.

The moment she was out of sight Harry ran up the main staircase, taking the steps two at a time, and slammed himself into the Green Room. He carefully made his way to the window that overlooked the street below.

Thick plumes of smoke filled the idyllic village. It looked like some building on the other side of town had been turned into an inferno, and smoke rose from smaller fires elsewhere throughout Hogsmeade. Harry’s eyes and throat began to water and sting from the acrid air, but he nonetheless forced his gaze to roam over the area, looking frantically for threats, gripping his wand firmly in his hand.

A flash of yellow just below and to his right caught his attention. He stared in horror as a young blonde woman stood dumbly before a trio of advancing Death Eaters.

*What the fuck are you doing? Get out of there!* His mind screamed at her.

The woman, however, seemed petrified beyond all rational thought.

Cursing to himself, Harry locked eyes on the back of Ceridwyn’s Cauldron Shop across the street.

One of the Death Eater’s raised his wand.

*“REDUCTO!”* Harry bellowed the curse, confident that none would hear him over the din in the village.
Electric blue light coursed across the street and demolished the second story of the shop, sending massive chunks of wood and brick raining down on the Death Eaters below. Two went down and stayed down, dead or injured, Harry didn’t know, but the woman and the third Death Eater seemed relatively uninjured.

Without stopping to think, Harry took aim again and sent a pulsing *Scourgify* at the man’s chest. The Death Eater stiffened and fell, his limbs jerking and his hands clawing at his throat before he finally shuddered and stilled.

The woman didn’t move even as the man presented a completely passive target.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!”

He was running back down the stairs and out the front door of the Head before he even realized he was doing so. The woman remained exactly where she was. As he neared, Harry recognized Celeste, the Gladrags girl and friend of Alice Fawley, her eyes wide with shock, her wand laying forgotten on the ground below.

“What the fuck are you waiting for?” He screamed into her placid face, “come on!”

Her lip trembled. “I don’t know what to do … I don’t know what to do …” she repeated, heedless of Harry tugging on her shoulder.

The young wizard stared at her, incredulous, but before he could drag the woman back to her senses he heard the sound of sobbing coming from an alcove across the street. Abandoning Celeste for the moment he sprinted around the wreckage of the cauldron shop towards the sound and started as a pair of wide brown eyes stared out at him from the shaded corner.

*Christ, what’s her name …* He recognized the young child by sight as the granddaughter of Ambrosius Flume, the owner of Honeydukes … *Melanie? No … Melody … Mellia! Yeah, that’s it.*

“Mellia, come with me – it isn’t safe for you out here, okay?”

The sobbing girl – she couldn’t be older than seven, Harry guessed – literally leapt at him and attached herself to his body like a little monkey, her head bleeding onto his shirt. He rushed back over to Celeste, his haste made awkward by the weight of the trembling child.

“Dammit, Celeste! We have to get her inside! Now shrug it off, pick up your wand, and come on! You’re not even hurt!”

“If ever asked, Harry would have said that he considered himself a gentleman, and that hitting girls was just not on. So he shocked even himself when he slapped the salesgirl across the face with his free hand.

“She’s a fucking little kid, you’re a grownup with a wand! Pull yourself together and get inside. *Now!*”

Understanding flickered in the young woman’s eyes and she finally – *finally!* – grabbed her wand and followed Harry back to the Head.

But the moment the door closed behind them the little girl in Harry’s arms started to squirm viciously and sob all the louder. “Rosie! We left Rosie out there! Please, mister, please, don’t let her die!”
Christ, there’s another kid out there?

“Okay, okay Mellia, calm down, I’ll go and get her. You and Celeste here, you go down those steps over there to the kitchen. The students guarding the door will help you, okay? Tell them, whatever they do, not to leave – they have to protect the younger kids, all right?”

The child wiped her eyes and nodded firmly. She grasped the still-boggled Celeste by the hand to lead her away. *Future Gryffindor that one, I’d bet.*

With that final thought, Harry ducked back into the street. The smoke was even thicker than it had been, and his quiet cries of “Rosie!” tore at his throat.

“Rosie? Rosie! Please, I just want to help you, where are you? Rosie?” Every word he uttered made him feel like a target had been placed between his shoulder blades, but dammit all, he couldn’t leave a little kid defenseless in a bloody war zone.

He cautiously made his way up towards the intersection with High Street.

“Rosie?”

There was a soft, tinkling metallic sound to his right, and Harry turned to stare at a tiny black schnauzer puppy, a rose-printed collar around its neck, its red leash dragging behind it.

*You have got to be fucking kidding me.*

“Seriously!? A dog?!”

This is why Ab doesn’t like children, he fumed as he tucked the wriggling, yipping, ungrateful little beast under his arm. Sharp claws dug into his stomach and he didn’t hesitate to stun the bloody thing, tender emotions of seven-year-olds be damned.

The smoke thickened even more, and Harry realized with dread that the derelict building between the Hog’s Head and the junction with High Street – a hulking mass that Ab had said used to be a theater at one time and spice market at another – was on fire.

Two black-robed figures appeared through the dense clouds of smoke in front of him.

A young voice echoed through the first one’s mask. “Oi, ain’t you the little squib who did ol’ Walden?”

*Fuck. Are we doing this?*

Harry cast a quick glance around. The area seemed deserted, and it wasn’t like anyone watching could see much of anything through the smoke of the burning building.

*All right then. Bold recklessness swelled in him. Yeah. We’re doing this.*

He smiled at the pair. “Well, no and yes.”

“Huh?” the other wondered, and Harry snorted.

“Yes, I killed Macnair, you sack.” He gripped his wand and their eyes widened. “But I’m no squib. *Depulso!*”

Both men were lifted off their feet by the banishing curse and sent hurtling straight through the wall of the now fiercely-burning ruin. Harry fancied he saw two flares of flames where the men must
have landed, and their screams – horrible, inhuman sounds that made his stomach roil – stopped after only a few moments.

Okay then.

With a last glance around the street, Harry stowed his wand and turned towards the Head. It’s got passive anti-fire wards on it. It should be fine.

The public room of the Head was empty when he re-entered. Harry quickly cast an Enervate on Rose-the-bloody-dog-who-almost-got-him-killed and trudged down the steps to the kitchen. Two sets of wide eyes met his, and the strawberry blonde he had spoken with earlier quickly stood aside so he could enter the room.

“Rosie! You saved her mister, you saved her!” Mellia crooned rapturously, and clutched the dog to herself while simultaneously trying to hug Harry.

As he sank to the floor, Harry could only cough, his smoke-filled lungs searing. He ran a hand through his hair and stared when he realized it was black with ash and soot. I must look like hell.

Mellia worked her way into his lap, fussing over her dog and her new idol’s heroics.

Gladrags girl sat huddled in the corner and would not meet his gaze.

Harry closed his eyes.

When Ab pushed his way past the crowd in the Head half an hour later, Harry was running through his story – a highly edited version – for the second time at the bar with Alice and Auror Goyle. Several of the older students had remained in the pub and were corroborating what they could of his account of the attack. Celeste remained in the corner and only responded with nods or shakes of her head when Goyle questioned her.

The chaos in the village thankfully made the other Aurors less interested in his actions, though all he encountered praised his rescue of Celeste and Mellia, though some seemed decidedly reluctant to do so. Indeed, the little girl had left ten minutes before with her mother and grandfather, both of whom couldn’t stop thanking Harry. Granted, neither had ever deigned to speak with him before, but he was too worn out from the anxiety of the battle to get angry at their sudden change in heart.

Most of the Aurors’ attention was instead centered on James and Lily who, Harry was shocked to learn, had actually engaged Voldemort himself when he appeared near Honeydukes at the end of the battle. From what Harry gathered, they’d only fought for minute or two, but it gave the crowd of students they were escorting time to get into the store before Dumbledore himself apparated in and drove an uninjured Dark Lord away.

Well shit, go Mum and Dad!

Meanwhile Sirius and his group, Alice informed him, had evacuated a large crowd of students to Hogwarts through the Shack. Harry expected his godfather’s counterpart was thoroughly enjoying any female attention he was receiving as a result of his heroics.

Ab said nothing as he listened to Harry’s account, though his face was thunderous. Alice had been a bit cold when he admitted to slapping her friend, but she still warmly clasped him on the shoulder when she and Goyle stood up to leave and escort the remaining students back to the school.
Silence filled the empty pub.

“A ruddy dog, boy?”

Harry scuffed the floor with his soot-covered boot. “Well, I was under the impression that it was another little kid … You angry I went out?”

The older man stared at him and sighed. “Yes. No. Don’t know. Glad this ain’t goin’ to make problems for us … And you did the right thing, I reckon. Still, I don’t like you bein’ out in that sort of mess. And a bleedin’ dog, of all things …” He sat down heavily in a chair. “Plus I left too, after all.”

Harry joined him at the table. “So what did happen in the Alleys?”

Ab shook his head. “’Bout what happened here. Death Eaters showed up all of a sudden and started attackin’ the buildings. Spent more time focusin’ on stuff rather than people, so I suspect they were either just tryin’ to scare folks or it was a diversion. Talked to an young Auror outside. Same story near abouts here. Lots of property destroyed, not too many deaths given what the number could’a been.” Harry didn’t need to ask. “Fellow I spoke with said the count for the village is six, not countin’ at least half a dozen or so Death Eaters. Two were students, killed by debris. Not sure the count for London.”

Harry nodded slowly. “So, it’s possible that both attacks were diversions? But would Voldemort show up a diversion? That just … doesn’t seem his style.”

The bartender shrugged. “Lad, I just dunno. My brother’ll have an idea, sure enough, but really, not like he knows either.” He gave Harry a searching look. “Rookie Auror said that most of the dead Death Eaters were found around here. Two buried in rubble from the fucking second floor of Ceridwyn’s exploding, two burned in the building they were setting on fire next door. Kid implied that they thought the men’s own spells probably went wrong … Was it you?”

Harry coughed delicately. “Yeah, er – sorry about the cauldron shop …”

Ab gave a sudden bark of laughter. “‘Sorry’ he says!” He kept on chuckling. “And the fifth one that inexplicably drowned in the middle of the road?”

Harry shrugged. “That idea I had about an internal Scourgify worked.”

The bartender’s mouth turned up in a mean little smile. “I imagine it’s goin’ to drive the poor Aurors crazy trying’ to figure out who’s goin’ around casting cleaning charms on Death Eaters.” He turned suddenly more serious. “Well, you keep Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon free. Don’t like the thought a’ you being stuck places when things get dodgy, so I’m teachin’ you to Apparate. Can be tough, but I don’t think it’ll be too hard for you after some practice.”

Harry grinned at Ab. “Brilliant!”

The door to the Head creaked open, and both men whipped around.

“Merlin, relax, it’s just me,” said Pel as he wandered into he pub. “Glad to see the pub’s all right.”

“Yeah, you ruddy drunk, the beer and whiskey’s all undamaged so you’re free to drink to your liver’s content. We’re fine too, so’s you know,” Ab added wryly.

Pel gave him a tight smile that didn’t reach his eyes and carefully put a folded scrap of parchment on the table. “Just found this stuck to your door.”
Aberforth unfolded the parchment and Harry’s breath caught as he looked at the familiar, spiky handwriting.

"Right little hero you are, Potter."

Fury and bile rose up in him in equal measure. “Fuck – fuck this! Dammit, this isn’t some spaced-out seer, this guy knows exactly what he’s saying and he’s fucking taunting me with it! He knows my real name, even! What the fuck is going on?”

The bartender didn’t bother to tell him to calm down – truth be told, Ab just wanted to iterate Harry’s outburst. “You come back home through the front?” he asked the boy. When Harry nodded, Ab cursed under his breath. “Bastard had to have put it up either while the Aurors were here or right after they left. They’ve only been gone, what, not even five minutes.”

Pel raised an eyebrow. “Bold, that.”

“He’s playing with me,” Harry said in a flat, furious voice, seething with the same thought he’d had the last time the ‘Dementor Stalker’ left him a note. “Like a cat with a mouse before it finally kills it. He’s fucking playing with me.”

“Aye.”

“Whiskey all around, Ab?” Pel asked. “It’s never too early.” The other two grunted their agreement and Harry got up to pour out a generous three-finger measure for them all.

They sat silently drinking and staring at the note, willing it to give up its author’s identity.

Finally, Pel broke the silence. “I don’t have answers for you about this, my friend, but last night I was genning up on all this and finally found a bit of something that might relate to your general situation.”

Harry perked up. “I’ll take any scrap of information I can get, Pel.”

The man pulled out a battered leather-bound notebook. “All right. All the creatures-oriented books that mention Dementors that I’ve found don’t give us anything helpful or that we don’t already know. So I broadened the search and included Ministry documents that I could get my hands on – I owe drinks to about five blokes now, so that’s on you two – an’ found two things. The first is a reference from the DMLE daily ledger from, get this, 1774.”

Both men raised their eyebrows as Pel shuffled to find the right page of his notes. “I copied it down exactly. It reads: ‘Aurors Rowle and Zeller were called to a disturbance at the home of Galahad and Gwyneth Gudgeon, Number 3 Allihock Place, Godric’s Hollow, Wales at 11:38 a.m. Aurors found a middle-aged witch accosting the couple in their parlour. The woman claimed to be Glinda Gudgeon nee Perdit, the owner of the home. No records of a woman by this name exist, and the couple denied any relation. The alleged Ms. Gudgeon (G) was arrested and interrogated by Aurors Rowle (R) and Zeller (Z). Transcript of interview follows.’ Now a lot of this is pointless waffle for us, but here’s the good part:

G: But you must have records of me! I was a Ravenclaw, class of ’64, and my husband’s been
involved with the Ministry for years! Just last week the Prophet published a piece on his challenge to the Minister’s new policy on interaction with Muggle representatives of the government!

Z: I know of no such new policy, and forgive me for saying it, but if you graduated only ten years ago, time has not been kind to you, madame. I was also in Ravenclaw at the time, and I have no recollection of you.

G: Ten years ago? Are all Aurors so dim-witted? The numbers are simple, sir. It’s 1889. That’s twenty-five years!

R: Madame, you believe it’s 1889? (Subject nods). It’s 1774, madame.”

Pel cut in. “So there’s a long bit where she argues with them – lady’s got an impressive mouth on her when she gets her hackles up – and here’s the next bit that concerns us:

G: I don’t know, I don’t know. All I know is that I was sitting at home reading and suddenly everything went cold. I went out onto the stoop to see what was the matter and … it was so much worse. And then I saw it. I’ve never seen one before, but I knew enough to know what it was. A Dementor. I … I didn’t know what to do, and then before I knew it, it had me and it leaned in … (Subject begins crying) It was like I was in nothing, and I didn’t even care. And then I heard a voice. It said something, something about the price, and souls for souls. And then it hurt, and I heard those people screaming to get of their house, but it’s my house! I know it is! But my things weren’t there. I just … I just don’t understand. Please, please, can’t you find my husband?

Z: So to be clear, you maintain that you received the Dementor’s Kiss?

G: I know how it sounds, I know! But it’s what happened.

Z: And have you committed any crimes that would merit this? Have you been convicted of any crimes by the Wizengamot?

G: No! Never! (Subject begins crying again.) Please, can’t you find my husband?

Pel sat back in his chair. Harry felt cold all over, and shivered despite his proximity to the fire. The price is fixed. A soul for a soul, little wizard. He had no doubt at all. Glinda Gudgeon had been telling the truth.

“Mrs. Gudgeon, I’m sorry to say, was eventually committed to the long-term care ward – then called the Derwent Facility – at St. Mungo’s under the name Glinda No Surname. She, well, they found her body a few months after that. She’d hung herself with her bedsheets,” Pel said quietly.

Harry gulped down the last of his Firewhiskey and tried to still his shaking hands.

“There’s obviously no question about the similarity between her … experience and yours, Harry.”

The younger man gave a jerky nod. “They sent her back or here or whatever, and there was more than a hundred years’ difference between her time and theirs. Mine was only nineteen years.”

Pel sighed. “I know. I have no answer to that. Maybe she was from a different universe than you are,
an’ their time moved at a different pace, just like your own world might move a bit faster than ours. I just don’t know. Funny thing is – I did more research after finding this – in 1866 a Gawain Gudgeon did in fact marry a Miss Glinda Perdit, Ravenclaw graduate of Hogwarts, class of ‘64. By all accounts that Mrs. Gudgeon lived a peaceful life – had some kids an’ whatnot. Her great-great-grandson plays Chaser for Ravenclaw right now.”

The man shook his head and leaned forwards. “Beyond all that, there are two other similarities that I find interesting. First, neither you nor Mrs. Gudgeon were criminals, an’ neither of you had ever been tried for a crime. Second, I think you both had … tempestuous relationships with the Ministry. Her interview goes on for awhile, an’ it seems that her husband was a great critic of the Minister. According to her, he apparently had planned to expose his significant ethical violations against Muggles before Glinda was Kissed. Could be that the Minister sent them after her husband, but they only found her instead. Or maybe she was the target, I don’t know.”

Pel looked at Harry sympathetically. “From what you’ve told us, your Minister – Fudge, was it? – reacted poorly when you informed him of Voldemort’s return. Given that Dementors are supposed to be under Ministry control, that might be important.”

Harry felt sick. “Are you saying that you think Fudge set those Dementors on me?”

The old solicitor nodded and Ab grunted his agreement. “Ain’t no one able to order Dementors around but the Ministry, s’far as I know. Have some sort of agreement with ‘em, from what I’m told.” He paused. “Course it might have been your Voldemort somehow. You said he said somethin’ about approachin’ the Dementors when he got brought back to life in the graveyard.”

“So, so what does this information do for us? For me?”

“Well,” Pel began, “it at least confirms that you aren’t the only person that this has happened to. Beyond that, we’ll have to see.”

_I’m so damn tired of ‘waiting and seeing.’_

“There is one other weird thing. On a hunch I dug through the _Prophet_ edition for the day Mrs. Gudgeon arrived in 1774. And I found something – well, I don’t quite know if I should call it ‘alarming’ or ‘interesting.’ On that day, September 17th, 1974, a mass murderer by the name of Caedes Acriss was administered a sanctioned Kiss in Azkaban. Near as I can tell, it happened at about the same time as Mrs. Gudgeon’s arrival in Godric’s Hollow.”

“A soul for a soul …” Ab muttered thoughtfully.

“Huh?” Harry’s mind just wasn’t working fast enough. This day had seemed to go on forever and it wasn’t even late afternoon yet. _Shit, we still have to do regular Saturday night business._

“I was thinking the same thing,” Pel admitted and turned to Harry. “The synchronization of Acriss’ demise an’ Gudgeon’s arrival, combined with what the Dementors said to the both of you, Harry, suggests that they slid Gudgeon into a spot in this world to, well I don’t know how to put it exactly, maybe to balance out the removal of Acriss’ soul? They bring one new soul in just as they take one native soul away? In other words, ‘a soul for a soul.’ Of course, that’s just a guess but …”

“Merlin,” Ab cursed.

“Wait,” Harry said with some feeling, “if they’re just sliding our souls into empty spots, then why aren’t there more people from other dimensions popping up? The Dementors surely have Kissed more than a few, yeah?”
Both men shrugged helplessly.

“So who was Kissed the day I arrived?” Harry asked. “It would have been August 2nd, 1976 – I didn’t wake up until the next day, but it definitely happened on the second.”

Pel frowned and finished his drink. “That’s just it, my friend. I’ve been through the records, not just for Britain but for every country in the world, an’ I’ve checked myself three times. As far as every magical government in existence is concerned, no one was Kissed that day, or any day around that one. In fact, the most recent Kiss I could find was in Britain in 1912.”

Harry stared at his hands and felt the thrumming of his heart. “So whose spot did my soul take then?”

Pel shrugged again.

“Bugger me,” Ab growled.

19 March, 1978

Despite the horror of the coordinated Hogsmeade-Diagon Alley attack in January, and Harry’s private mounting anxiety over the anonymous notes, the next month and a half passed peacefully enough. Voldemort hadn’t launched any more large scale measures, though if a person paid close enough attention they’d notice people still disappearing in a trickle, and no further messages had been left for the young dimensional traveler.

Ab had indeed taught him to Apparate – definitely not his favored means of travel – though it took nearly six long practice sessions before he managed it to the bartender’s satisfaction.

His Mondays at Hogwarts with Poppy continued – she had been most impressed with his OWL scores and had insisted on teaching him ever more tricky healing techniques – and each week he could feel the gloomy pall cast over the school by the Hogsmeade Raid lighten a bit more. This set him to grumbling about idiots who let themselves be lulled into a sense of security rather than maintaining constant vigilance, to Poppy’s amusement.

He found himself missing Hagrid quite keenly. The half-giant had shown up to Aberforth’s surprise birthday party and told Harry that he was being sent on a “secret mission” to parlay with the giants on behalf of … Hagrid realized he’d said to much then, but his friend was quite sure he could fill in the blanks. In the meantime, Harry was feeding most of Hagrid’s creatures – he drew the line at even thinking of approaching the acromantula colony – and fretted often about his absent friend’s safety.

The surprise party he’d thrown for Aberforth had been a great success that was well received by all but the birthday boy himself. When a giggling Ariana had told him that her brother’s birthday was February 14th, Harry, Pel, and Dalcop had given the entire public room a mini-makeover to look like Madame Puddifoot’s. Hours of drunken Valentine’s Day hijinks followed. It would be a very long time, the young wizard assumed, before he found the picture of Captain Burke, Sanguini, and a very drunk Dalcop draped suggestively over a scowling Ab unfunny. Harry suspected that Ab would have put an end to the whole thing, had the younger man not sent word to all their regular Christmas clientele. Business boomed that night, even Quisby seemed content, and Ab raked in the coins.

This morning Harry had spent some time in Jinky’s Jumble, rifling through racks and boxes for some new used clothes. Ab had pointed out the day before that both his shirts and trousers had grown far too short for his frame, and Harry had been delighted to discover he’d actually grown three inches. Granted, three inches in a bit over a year at his age wasn’t all that much, and he still griped about evil
Dursleys and stunted growth, but he’d gladly accept whatever inches the fates deigned to bestow upon him.

Walking back to the Head with his bag of purchases, he smiled politely when tiny old Mrs. Flume, the matriarch of Honeydukes, gave him a toothy grin and tossed him a chocolate frog. She’d always been one to simply pretend he didn’t exist, but had changed her tune abruptly after he’d saved her granddaughter. Now, every time he passed their shop she seemed to notice and tossed him some sweet or another. It was annoying to only find growing acceptance in the village after risking his neck to save a kid and a bloody dog, but he wouldn’t deny that it was rather nice not to be hated or ignored by his neighbors.

*Well, not all of them, I guess,* he shrugged to himself as Celeste the Gladrags girl, with whom Mrs. Flume was speaking outside that morning, determinedly didn’t look his way. *Whatever.*

When he arrived back in the pub, Ab had just come down for his late breakfast and was opening up the newest gift from Guin Dearborn. She’d never stopped leaving them baked goods in the morning every week or two, much to both men’s delight. Today it looked like apple and cinnamon scones, complete with icing sugar. “Don’t you dare eat all of those, old man!” Harry warned him as he thundered down the stairs to drop off his packages.

He legged it back up with all the intensity of a teenager presented with a load of good food. “Do we need to warm them or did Guin put a charm on – Ab?”

A broken plate was on the floor. A partially-eaten scone lay near a hand attached to an arm that was not moving.

“AB!” Harry rushed around the bar and found the old man on the ground, his face unnaturally pale and his stomach heaving almost imperceptibly. A dusting of sugar was on his lips. “Oh fuck, Ab!”

*He’s old. Heart attack? Stroke?* Harry looked at the scone. The sugar was just a bit … wrong. Too gooey, the wrong viscosity. Guin’s icings … they never looked like that. At all.

Cold certainty slammed into him so violently he felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

*Poison. They’re fucking poisoned.*

*What do I do?!*

*What do I DO?!*

One of his OWL questions popped into his mind, accompanied by the almost-forgotten sneering voice of Severus Snape. *A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you most poisons.*

Harry took the stairs to the hallway between the stable and kitchen three at a time and threw open both doors. *Where would he keep them?*

“*Accio bezoar!*” he roared.

Nothing happened.

He waited.

He tried again.
Nothing happened.

“How many goddamn goats to we have in this place and we don’t have a single fucking bezoar? Seriously!”

*Keep yourself together, dammit.*

Okay. No bezoars. *Poppy talked about accidental ingestion of toxic substances once. What the fuck did she say? Panic was starting to fray Harry’s thoughts and quicken his breathing. What the fuck did Poppy say?* he screamed to himself.

Oh.

*Poppy. Ab taught me how to do this. Happy thoughts, dammit please, happy thoughts.* Harry concentrated with everything he had.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” He nearly burst into tears when his albatross appeared. “Please, go to Hogwarts. Tell Madame Pomfrey that Aberforth has been poisoned at the Hog’s Head! Go now!” The giant bird soared away leaving a fading trail of silver mist in its wake.

*But what, what did she say?* A bit calmer now that something had been done, the memory filtered back to Harry. Poppy was serving him tea and said … *said something about how, when in doubt, the best thing to do is to administer an em – an em – what the fuck was the word? Something to make the patient vomit … Fuck it.*

“*Accio something to make a person vomit!*” he cried desperately.

Looking back later, Harry would cringe when he realized how huge a gamble it had been to cast such a spell in a place like the Hog’s Head. In addition to the hundreds of bottles and casks full of liquor guaranteed to lead to potential vomiting, the Head wasn’t exactly known for its cleanliness. Half the building could have barreled at the desperate boy.

But perhaps his magic understood what he meant, for no liquor bottles, or anything else for that matter, came flying at the young wizard.

Instead, he felt a soft fluttering against his breastbone. Opening his shirt collar, he looked down with wide eyes to see the side of his mokeskin back lightly indenting as if something in it were trying to get out.

Numb fingers undid the drawstring and opened the bag’s mouth. Harry deftly caught the small object that had responded to his summoning spell.

Opening his hand he looked down to see the corncockle Ariana had given him so long ago.

“Wha –?”

*Ab is dying you fool! Get MOVING!* his internal voice roared.

*Screw it.*

He clamored up the stairs and almost wet his pants in relief when he saw that Ab was still breathing, albeit faintly. A thin stream of viscous, discolored liquid was running out of the side of his mouth. Without preamble, Harry crushed the flower as much as he could in his hand, wrenched the man’s mouth open, and stuffed it down his throat. He summoned a glass of water and pulled Ab to a sitting position, all the while praying *Please don’t choke, please let this work.* Filling the man’s mouth with
water, he massaged his throat to make him swallow the liquid and to push the flower down his digestive track.

And then nothing happened.

Harry sat and stared at the old man, his ears alert for the sound of a rushing Floo and the arrival of someone who knew what the hell to do.

Silence.

Without warning Ab reared forward in his arms and vomited up a huge stream of nastiness that covered both men.

The old man retched for several long minutes until Harry was sure that there simply couldn’t be anything left in his stomach, then slumped back, unconscious. Harry wiped his guardian’s mouth and face with his own sleeve, completely at a loss to do anything else, but slightly encouraged that Ab’s breathing seemed a tiny bit stronger.

“Please, Ab, please don’t die. Please don’t die on me …” He vaguely noted that he was whispering those words over and over again, but had no recollection of when he had started speaking. “Please don’t die, Ab. Please, Ab.”

After what seemed like hours but couldn’t have been more than a few moments, he registered the rush of the Floo.

Poppy Pomfrey bustled over to them. “Harry? Harry!” She snapped her fingers in front of his face. “I need you smart and present right now, young man!”

Harry roused himself with difficulty. “Okay. Okay. Thanks for com –”

“What happened? Quickly now!”

“He – he was fine when I came in, I dropped some things off downstairs, came up, and he was on the floor. He’d dropped the scone and was heaving a little. Not – he wasn’t breathing much. I figured he’d been poisoned since he was eating … but I guess I don’t know for sure. Couldn’t find a bezoar, so I put a corncockle down his throat, gave him water, and he vomited a lot. Seems to be breathing better but I don’t –”

Her wand was already out and casting spells. “Hush now. He has been poisoned with a caustic substance that was beginning to dissolve his internal organs. Your treatment slowed the process enough, though it’s done more damage to his digestive tract.” She gave him a compassionate look. “I can fix this, Harry.”

Harry looked at her for a moment, uncomprehending. I can fix this Harry …

He burst into tears.

“We – we – we – have so many – so many – fucking goats – but there weren’t, there weren’t any – any bezoars anywhere – I – I –”

Her arms were suddenly around him. “Hush now, child. You did well. How you thought of a corncockle, I don’t know, I haven’t heard that old remedy in years, but he’ll be all right. It’s all right.”

Harry nodded jerkily and dried his face off, already chastising himself for crying at his age.
“Now, Harry, I have everything in my bag that I need to treat him for the moment. I could move him to the castle, but given his age and condition I’d rather not risk the Floo. I’ll levitate him to his room if you’ll please call the Aurors.” When his jaw dropped open, she tsked in impatience. “This is attempted murder, dear, you must call them!”

“Yeah, yeah of course.” Attempted murder. Merlin. “But, uh, can you start treating him here and … maybe Floo the headmaster? He can call the Aurors. They, well I don’t think most of them like me much and they think I’m a squib, so they’ll probably get here faster if someone like Dumbledore contacts them, yeah?”

Poppy sighed and opened her bag. “Unfortunately, I suspect you are correct.” She handed him a bottle of pale green liquid. “Give him a spoonful of this, be sure to massage his throat, while I Floo the school.”

Not five minutes later, Poppy was further attending to Aberforth up in his bedroom while Harry waited anxiously in the pub, still covered with sick. He looked at the headmaster with hollow, shocked eyes when the man arrived and hurried to his side.

“What happened?”

There were no ‘my boy’s,’ and no pretense at serenity. Dumbledore, Harry dumbly observed, looked terrified. In a dead voice he quickly ran through the events of the morning. “Poppy says he’ll be okay in a few days, maybe a week. He’ll have a bad sore throat and upset stomach for a while, and he might get tired more easily, but he’ll be fine, she said.”

Dumbledore nodded and clasped his shoulder with a trembling hand. “Thank you, Harry. Thank you. I’ll – I’ll contact the Aurors. Just tell them what you told me.”

It wasn’t a long wait for a trio of Aurors to arrive. Apparently being contacted by the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot lit fires under arses. Harry distantly recognized one of the three as working sporadically in the STIFF back when he was imprisoned, but the man had been little more than another suit to him then. One of the other two went to speak with Poppy, while those that stayed behind had Harry go through his story twice and remained exceptionally polite. The presence of Dumbledore and the solicitous care he showed Harry likely cued them into the fact that now was not the time to get crabby with the squib.

Dumbledore had visibly paled when Harry mentioned giving Ab a corncockle he had in his possession, but said nothing.

The Aurors quickly put the entire box of uneaten scones, as well as the one that Ab had been munching, into a sealed box for testing. They then poked and prodded around the Head, paying special attention to the kitchen and the bar area. However, when they moved to start searching other rooms upstairs, Harry roused himself enough from his shocked stupor to put his foot down.

“I’m pretty sure you need a warrant or something to search our home, right?” Out of the corner of his eye, he spied Dumbledore giving him a small nod. “You’ve got the evidence you need, and we’re the victims here. If you want to search any more, come back with something official.” The man hesitated. “I’ll call my solicitor then. Chief Warlock Dumbledore, would you please observe these men and make sure that they stick to their prescribed duties while I’m in the other room and your brother is upstairs?”

And that stopped that. He thought he saw a faint smirk grace Dumbledore’s face.

Soon enough, the Aurors were gone, two to interview the Dearborns and the other to head back to
the Ministry with the evidence.

It was suddenly awkward, the room empty but for Harry and the headmaster.

The older man fiddled with his beard. “Ah, Harry? You said … you said you used a corncockle as an emetic? Something to make Aberforth vomit?”

Harry nodded.

“And you knew that corncocksles had such properties as to be a suitable emergency measure?”

Well no, but Accio worked so … Instead Harry softly said, “Yes sir.”

Dumbledore gave him a very odd smile. “Well done, my boy. But please, satisfy an old man’s curiosity. Where did you get such a flower in March?”

Harry blinked. “Oh. I’ve had that particular flower for more than a year. It was a gift, see, and I guess there must be some magic on it to keep it fresh. Though honestly I never really thought about that until now.”

“May I ask from whom you received such a gift?” Dumbledore’s eyes paradoxically looked both very young and beyond ancient at the same time.

Harry coughed uncomfortably. “Honestly, sir? Ariana gave it to me. The painting of her, I mean. I don’t – I don’t know how she did it, but she sent it through her portrait and it became three dimensional somehow.”

Only the smallest gasp betrayed Dumbledore’s surprise. “Ah! … I suppose I should have suspected. It would be she, wouldn’t it?” Harry had no idea what to say in response to this. “Well, as I said, very well done, Harry. I shall look in on my brother for a moment and then I must head back to the school.” He made for the stairs before pausing and calling back over his shoulder, “If you find yourself in need of anything, or if Aberforth’s condition changes, please do not hesitate to contact me again. Trust that I shall keep you updated on what the Aurors discover.”

Harry sat in the darkened room and stared at the sleeping form of Aberforth Dumbledore. It was hours later, but it seemed like days. He had heard faint carousing in the pub through the floorboards and the occasional calls for toasts in Ab’s honor, but he didn’t really attend to the noise.

Poppy had finally left around ten that evening, after she was certain that Harry knew which potions to give Ab and when, and emphasized that he was to contact her if he had the slightest concern. He hadn’t really moved from his chair since then.

Earlier Doc and Guin Dearborn had come by after being released by the Aurors, the latter looking absolutely crushed that someone had used her early morning gift to try to kill Ab – or maybe Harry, as Pel had noted.

When Quisby had refused Harry’s plea to come in and run the pub – “Course I feel bad about the old man, squib, but I got me a date with Elmira March tonight! Figure it out on your own.” – Doc had taken a position behind the bar while Guin disappeared into the kitchen.

“You mind Aberforth, kid.” Doc had said. “We’ll mind your pub for you.” Harry had started to protest, but Dearborn cut him off. “You saved my arse, Harry. Least I can do is help you a bit while you and yours are in the same sort of place I was. Get your arse upstairs, and don’t let me see you
until you come down for some food later.”

Doc Dearborn would make a good dad, Harry had thought distractedly as he climbed the stairs. The pub hadn’t burned down or hosted a revolt yet, so apparently he made a decent publican as well.

But now the pub was silent, the Dearborns either in one of the guestrooms – please not the Blue Room. Yorda was in there last night and I never got around to cleaning it – or gone home.

Harry nearly had a heart attack when the door was pushed open and a very pregnant Goat lumbered in and sat herself down heavily next to Harry, her head resting on the bed.

He quirked a tired smile. “He’ll be okay, girl. Don’t worry.”

Goat passed gas, gave a long, satisfied bleat, and helped herself to a large mouthful of Aberforth’s beard.

“Bah’s right, ya bint,” came a very weak voice from the bed.

“Ab!” Harry cried. The man winced. “You shouldn’t be awake yet,” he added in a quieter voice.

“Do what I please, boy. What the fuck happened?”

“You went and got yourself poisoned with a Baneberry Potion, least according to the Aurors’ tests.”

Ab grunted. “Well that was ruddy stupid a’ me, huh?”

Harry laughed softly. “Guin was pretty broken up that someone spiked her scones.”

“You eat any?”

“No,” Harry responded, trying to smile. “The whole bit you did with flopping unconscious and shaking kind of put me off breakfast. Very dramatic.”

Ab sighed and closed his eyes. Harry handed him a Pain potion. “You aren’t supposed to have this for another hour, but it shouldn’t hurt to have just this one early.”

The man gratefully chugged down the vile swill and looked at the teenager gravely. “Tell me what happened. Baneberry’s some serious shit. Why aren’t I dead?”

Harry bit his lip and then told the bartender everything, not the abridged version he had given his brother. When Ab heard about the younger wizard’s desperate search for a bezoar he muttered “Usually sell ‘em. People pay a pretty galleon for such things, after all.”

“Yeah, let’s keep a few on hand from now on,” Harry responded dryly.

“Too right, that.”

When Harry got to the part about the corncockle, Ab’s eyes widened in a way so reminiscent of his brother that it would have been funny under different circumstances.

“You’re talking about the flower Ariana gave you, yeah?”

“Hey! I never told anyone about that! How’d you know?”

Ab smirked as much as his weakened condition allowed. “I spied on you that night, lad.”
Harry frowned. “Well, that isn’t nice.”

The old man wheezed out a laugh. “Says the kid who knows all about that special painted radio in the kitchen!”

“Oh … Didn’t know you knew about that.”

“Why else would I make the bloody kitchen the pub’s safe room, lad? Painting’s dead useful, if you can convince Ariana to help, a’ course.” Ab’s eyes narrowed. “You seem quite the dab hand at convincin’ my sister to help you.”

The teenager had the smile sheepishly before swiftly moving on and finishing the story.

“I haven’t heard that they’ve figured out who did it yet, but your brother said he’d keep us updated.”

Ab nodded. “You worried it was the note-writer, then?”

Harry’s stomach dropped. He hadn’t even thought of that. Shite. If that gets out, I’m humped.

The old man waved his hand dismissively. “We’ll deal with it when he have to deal with it.” He closed his eyes and sighed.

“You should rest, Ab. You need anything, just ask.” Harry watched the man’s face as he nodded drowsily. “Ab? I … I’m really glad you’re okay … I thought – I thought that you were going to die.” Harry was grateful the man didn’t open his eyes and see the tears that were silently coursing down his cheeks. “You’re … you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, I think.”

Ab grunted, barely half awake. “Your life’s in a sorry state, then, lad, a sorry state … Thanks, Harry …” His face relaxed in sleep.

The younger man sat for a long time and watched the steady rise and fall of Ab’s chest, gently touching it every so often to reassure himself that yes, he was still fine. Goat flopped over and fell asleep not long after Aberforth.

Harry eventually rose to stretch his legs and refill the water pitcher by Ab’s bed. As he passed through the sitting room, he found Ariana wide awake and apprehensive.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry Ariana! You’ve probably been terrified!” He quickly explained everything to her, and she sank down in relief.

A thought occurred to Harry. “Ariana, can you meet me in the Yellow Room, if the Dearborn’s aren’t in there, that is?”

She nodded, and a few minutes later he joined her in the empty guest room.

“I have to get back to Ab, but I really wanted to ask you about the corncockle … Did you know, back then when you gave it to me, I mean, did you know that, I don’t know, that Ab would need it? I mean, I didn’t know anything about them having healing properties.” The thought had been plaguing him all day.

She shook her head slowly.

“Well, then can I ask why you gave it to me?”

A thoughtful frown appeared on her face as Ariana wrote a reply on the painted parchment.
It was pretty and you were sad. I have so many of them anyway.

The perfect Ariana answer, that is. “Okay … can I ask … well, how did you give me your flower? I don’t understand that part.”

The blonde grinned at him impishly when she showed him her response in the mirror.

It wasn’t my flower, really. It was my brother’s!

She waved goodnight and skipped off out of the frame, leaving him in the darkened guest room to mull over that confusing little riddle, and to steam that she’d nicely managed to avoid his actual question.

Chapter End Notes

On corncockles as emetics: this is a well-known property of the flowers, which are also quite toxic in greater quantities – to the point that domesticated animals must be kept away from them to avoid poisoning and death. However, one flower should normally not be enough to have the emetic effect it does in this chapter. There will be more on this particular flower much later.

As always, thanks for reading and for your comments!
Of Cobblers, Cooks, and Clockmakers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XIX. Of Cobblers, Cooks, and Clockmakers

26 March, 1978

“NO! And that’s final! I can’t take this any more! I’m getting’ up, gettin’ dressed, and gettin’ to work and you ain’t gonna stop me!”

Harry folded his arms and stared at Aberforth impassively. “About done with the tantrum? If you’re not, that’s fine. I’m perfectly happy casting a silencing spell on your withered old arse.”

“Fuck you, boy! I’m almost a hundred years old and I can do what I wa –” The expression on his face as the younger wizard flicked a *Silencio* at him seemed nearly as lethal as an *Avada Kedavra*.

“As I was saying,” Harry went on calmly, “you nearly died. You are not getting out of that bed until Madame Pomfrey gives you the all-clear. She will be here soon enough. Until then, *you. will. stay. in. bed.* I’ll stick your arse to the mattress and strap you there with chains if I need to. Just *try me.*”

Ab would die before saying it to anyone else, but the boy’s final, growling dare was actually quite well executed.

A chuckle intruded upon the stand-off. “So, *that’s* the sort of thing you boys get up to in this place then?”

Harry’s face flushed so red it turned nearly purple, while Aberforth gave an appreciative snort.

*No bloody way!*

“Poppy!?” the younger wizard exclaimed in shock when he saw the identity of the newcomer. “Holy shi – that – you – Madame Pomfrey, did you – did you just crack a *sex joke*?!”

The matron of Hogwarts huffed. “Yes, dear, and a fine one it was, if I do say so myself.” She rolled her eyes and straightened her apron. “Oh do, close your mouth, Harry, you look like an idiot. I hate to rupture your fragile young psyche, but *yes, middle-aged women know all about the exciting and sundry varieties of sexual intercourse.*”

Harry continued gawping.

“Goodness, child, I work around hundreds of teenagers who all bring their delicate little problems with their nethers straight to me.” She chuckled. “You wouldn’t *believe* some of things I’ve had to extract from various orifices. Remind me to show you my photographic collection of some of the more memorable ones next week, dear.”

“Oh my God,” Harry choked out. *No mental pictures, no mental picture, no mental picture – shite, too late.* “I – you’re here – Ab – so, so, me – I’ll go somewhere – else. Away.” He fled the room, Poppy’s rich, mocking laughter following him down the stairs.

Harry bypassed the public room and the kitchens – Doc and Guin were in them, respectively, and while he appreciated the dedicated help they’d given him all week, he didn’t need *more* people
teasing him about the deep blush that he could still feel coloring his face. Instead he headed out the back door and took in a deep breath of the mild spring morning air.

Colin strode into the garden gracefully, having long since acquired the fluid, aquiline movement of an adult thestral. His first friend in this world had stayed close to the Head the last few days, somehow, Harry suspected, cottoning on to his human friend’s anxiety. The beast looked at the young man hopefully, but Harry shook his head.

“Sorry Colin, no meat with me for you today. I’ll scrounge up something from the kitchen for you later.”

The thestral snorted and meandered out of the garden, presumably to find a better supplied person.

Harry sat on the stoop and considered the last six days.

Ab had barely woken the first two days, and when he did, he had been alarmingly agreeable. Poppy had said that it would take several days for a man of his age to heal from the internal damage that had ravaged his system, but Harry couldn’t help but fret that there was some unseen malady which was still afflicting the old bartender.

On the third and fourth days, Ab had stayed awake for much longer. Although he had scoffed, he didn’t stop Harry from moving Ariana’s portrait into the room and reading to both of the Dumbledores from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He had to grin when Ab suggested he find a “bloody wardrobe and get his arse home,” since they apparently hosted trans-dimensional portals. The old man had affected skepticism when Harry emphatically claimed that the author was a muggle and this wasn’t actually a *history* book.

Minor arguments about fiction and the possibilities for inter-dimensional travel aside, those two restful days had actually been really … nice. Harry and Ab didn’t talk much, but Harry rarely left his side, the two of them either reading, snorting at the *Prophet*, or quietly playing cards. The younger wizard religiously kept to Ab’s potions schedule, even if the old fool didn’t like it, and Ariana watched over them both, beaming.

Quisby, the arse, had religiously kept to his own, pre-poisoning schedule, adamantly refusing to come in and cover extra shifts, despite professing his own lukewarm concern for Aberforth. The Dearborns, however, had immediately moved into the Green Room and had taken it upon themselves to keep the pub open and operating smoothly. Harry had been a bit worried when he learned that Guin often worked the pub at night – *she’s just so sweet and nice, they’ll eat her alive* – but his concerns were quickly dispelled earlier that week.

A grinning Doc had regaled him with the story of his petite little wife bludgeoning a werewolf (who’d gone nearly feral when another man hit on his date) over the head with a conjured Beater’s bat. As soon as the man dropped to the floor, she eyed the rest of the bar, smiled sweetly, and asked if anyone else felt like misbehaving. The pub had been remarkably pacific the rest of the week.

Harry had laughed into his tea when Doc told him that Guin had put the unconscious werewolf in the Red Room, along with a plate of freshly-baked ginger biscuits and a pain potion to comfort him when he woke up. She may have been the star beater on her house team at Hogwarts, as Doc had bragged, but damn if she wasn’t exceptionally kind to those she’d beaten into unconsciousness.

Indeed, Harry suspected that most of their patrons would be heartbroken when the Dearborns’ help was no longer needed. Guin’s cooking, he admitted to himself, far surpassed even Mrs. Weasley’s, and their clientele was enraptured with the improved fare. *If we aren’t careful, they’ll revolt and hand the whole place over to the Dearborns anyway* …
On the fifth day of Ab’s convalescence, Harry had come up from breakfast to find the man staring thoughtfully at Ariana as she wandered in the background of her portrait picking flowers. He didn’t even seem to notice when the younger wizard had sat down, shrugged a little, and started thumbing through his battered copy of *Tweeny Twig’s*.

Half an hour later, Ab was still staring at his painted sister, the look on his face old and rather broken.

“You want to talk about it?” Harry’s soft voice felt like an obscene intrusion into the long silence they had maintained.

“No.”

Harry had nodded and moved to go back to his reading.

“I told you I might’a been the one to kill her. Remember?” He hadn’t look at the younger man, but seemed to feel his slow nod. “There was a fight. Me, my brother, and his lover, that fuck Grindelwald.”

*What the holy shite is he – wait … Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald? The Grindelwald? Whoa … Fuck me, Dumbledore’s gay?! Bloody –* Harry had to clasp hold of his inner voice and shake it into submission since Ab was continuing and he seriously did not want to miss this.

“Ariana’d been … well, she’d been hurt bad years before, didn’t understand things sometimes, got upset real easy, but she was always so sweet. Innocent, y’know, just like her portrait. She didn’t – she got between us, scared and confused because we were fighting.” Ab pressed his eyes closed. “Never was able to figure out which a’ the three of us killed her.” He looked at his hands. “Don’t s’pose it really matters.”

“Why – why were you fighting?”

Ab sighed. “S’long story. Really want to hear it?”

*You’re goddamn right I want to hear it!*

The old man read his face easily enough. “Course you do. Settle in then. Ain’t a pretty story though.”

An hour later Ab had drifted off into a restless sleep and Harry had spent the afternoon contemplating the strange, tragic tale that was the adolescence of the Dumbledore children. His mind continued to reel in disgust at the thought that Dumbledore had originally been Grindelwald’s willing partner in a plan to bring the Muggles under the power of magicals, but he couldn’t help but pity the man for coming around and having to fight his former best friend and lover.

*I guess I never really knew him at all*, he had thought sadly.

*Or maybe … he brightened a bit … Maybe I just didn’t know the man he had been, only the man he became. He wrestled with his feelings, trying to map them out. It’s like … it’s like with Sirius. He’s a stupid little shit right now, but I know he has it in him to grow up into someone wonderful. Just because I don’t like him all that much now doesn’t mean I can’t love the man I did know.*

*And maybe Dumbledore wouldn’t have become the man I trusted back home if he hadn’t done all those things in his past that make me trust him a little less now.*

Harry had smiled sadly at the thought and, like so many other times since his arrival in this world, decided he could live with less than perfect, but somehow more humanized visions of those he once
had so wanted to idolize.

The three relatively peaceful days Harry and Ab had spent together had come crashing down the day before. Ab was feeling better. Ab was not pleased to still be bed-ridden. His young caretaker’s amusement about the childishness of the bartender’s behavior had dried up rather quickly, and now both were ready for Pomfrey to pronounce Ab healed so that they could both have a break.

Harry musings on the back steps of the Head were interrupted by a dry voice. “This what you do when I’m laid out, boy? Laze around the garden?”

He turned to see a smiling Ab. “Don’t get your knickers twisted, lad. Matron pronounced me healed. Know what that means, yeah?”

Harry’s eyes widened as Ab’s grin turned wicked.

“Means I’m in charge again.”

The younger wizard gulped.

27 March, 1978

The next morning Harry, Ab, and Guin – who showed up again even though Harry and Ab had insisted they were fine – were enjoying tea and some of her homemade pastries when a knock sounded on the door.

“We’re aren’t open yet!,” Guin had called at the same time as Harry yelled “No one’s home!” and Ab had boomed, his mouth full of pastry, “Goghway!”

“Aurors!” barked the unmistakable voice of Mad-Eye Moody.

Eyebrows raised all around the table, and Harry went over to unbar the door, silently reminding himself that Moody thought he had been obliviated of the one time they had met last summer.

Moody – whom he noted still had both legs – and an Auror he had dealt with in the STIFF (Auror Nondescript, he reminded himself, that’s what I called him then) stalked in and headed towards Ab and Guin’s table.

Both looked at him as he resumed his place.

“You want the boy here for this, sir?” Nondescript asked in a voice that implied he thought Ab clearly didn’t. Moody rolled his eyes and sat down comfortably.

Ab glared at him and addressed Harry instead. “Want another Chelsea bun there lad?” Harry grinned brightly at Auror Nondescript and helped himself.

Moody gave an odd half-grunt, half-chuckle at the old man’s antics. “Well, Ab, good news is we’ve caught your assailant. Bleedin’ idiot ordered the Baneberry Poison under his own name and had it sent directly to his business. Even signed for it!”

“Sounds like a real criminal mastermind,” Ab snarked. “Who?”
The grizzled Auror flipped open a parchment notebook. “Crispin Cordwaine.”

Guin’s mouth dropped open and Harry spit out “The *cobbler*?!”

“Aye, lad. That Crispin Cordwaine. He’d noticed Mrs. Dearborn regularly left baked goods for you both, so he ordered the poison, waited, and spiked all those scones when he saw the box on your stoop.”

Ab’s face was gray with rage, but he didn’t say a word.

“But why?” Harry gasped. “He must have had a motive – was he trying to kill Ab or me?”

The Auror sighed. “He didn’t much care which of you he got, though he had hoped for both. Pretty put out you both lived, he was. As for motive, he seems the basic sort of idiot. Hated that you were a squib, that you lived in the village. Got in his gob that people were going about praising you for saving the Flume lass. And he went on about how you dared come into his store a while back, and how Aberforth had threatened him into making you a pair of shoes.”

Shaking his head didn’t help to clear it. “But, I don’t understand! I hardly could have mattered to the man, we met for less than a minute! How could that make him want to kill me and Ab?” Harry asked, completely flummoxed.

Moody gave him a hard look and shrugged. “Hate’s like that, lad. Some people hate so much it’s not ever going to be rational.”

“Stupid’s too stupid sometimes to make sense,” Ab added in a low voice.

Auror Nondescript coughed pointedly and Moody nodded. “Yeah, there’s also more. In the interrogation we discovered that Cordwaine was the middleman between Olive Hornby and Walden Macnair in the assault on your pub last year.”

“What?” Ab roared.

“Man confessed that Hornby was a regular customer at his shoe store and they shared similar views,” Moody confirmed. “Somehow he knew about Macnair and his grudge against the boy. Apparently Macnair supplied the wardreader that was used, and Cordwaine passed it on to Hornby to plant during her inspection. Couldn’t get more details. We can only use Veritaserum on purebloods when he’s actually accused of committing a murder, not trying to commit one.” The man’s derisive snort made it clear what he thought of that policy.

A vision of a golden-stitched signature on delicate high heels that were sinking into mud flashed across Harry’s mind. The same golden signature reading *Cordwaine* was stitched into his own pair of leather boots, the pair that Ab had once procured for him from the man.

“So is Cordwaine a Death E – ?” Harry started to ask, but Moody cut him off.

“Man’s not marked, no. But his daughter Caliga’s married to Thorfinn Rowle, a reported friend of Macnair. He’s been suspected to have joined the Death Eaters –”

“ – but his involvement has *never* been confirmed,” Auror Nondesript finished in a firm voice.

Moody slapped his notebook closed. “That’s all I’ve got for you. Cordwaine will be tried sometime in the next few months – you’ll receive a written notification – but given his connections to the purebloods, I wouldn’t expect him to get as long a sentence as you would like.” Disgust at the situation briefly flashed across his face as he stood up to leave.
“Thank you, Professor Moody,” Harry said in a distant voice, still thrown off kilter by the stupidity and baffling randomness of Cordwaine’s hatred against them. There’s a lot of bad I can say about Voldemort, but at least he sometimes made better sense.

Distracted, he didn’t notice Moody staring at him for a few seconds.

“You fall on your head lad? Don’t know much about me ever being a professor, of all things!”

Harry mentally slapped himself and shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t know why I said that. This is all just so …”

He was saved from having to articulate what ‘this all is’ by Moody’s dismissive gesture. “Whatever, lad. You folks have a good day, and for Merlin’s sake, be vigilant about what you eat!”

As the two Aurors left the pub, Harry overheard Nondescript chuckle under his breath. “You, a professor Alastor? I’d pity those kids.”

Harry could hear the grin in Moody’s response, “Me too.”

Ab, Guin, and Harry sat in silence for awhile.

“Well, that’s that, I s’pose,” Ab finally said. “Least we know who did this.”

Harry stared at him, noticing the strange intonation. With a sinking feeling, he realized what Ab was really saying. There’s no way Cordwaine is the letter-writer. He simply can’t know about my past. Someone’s still out there, waiting for us.

They finished their currant buns without further conversation.

30 March, 1978

Harry was working the Head’s lunch rush alone that Thursday, though he used the term ‘rush’ loosely. So far he’d hardly been taxed with customers. Doc had stopped in during his lunch break from the Ministry to grab a sandwich, and the purple- and white- haired crone occupied her normal perch, today feasting on a vodka concoction and a fresh mango she’d brought for herself.

He looked up when the door opened and the sound of several boisterous male voices suddenly began to fill the pub.

It’s a ginger invasion, he thought in bemusement as he watched four tall redheaded men, one holding a toddler whose fiery hair poofed out wildly from underneath his blue hat, usher in another two ginger-haired and freckled little boys. They filed to the front tables and pushed two together, transfiguring one of the chairs into a high chair for the littlest one. As the men sat down, Harry heard one of them mutter “Oh thank Merlin it’s quiet in here. Still can’t believe you got yourself banned from the Sticks, Fabian. I was looking forward to Rosmerta’s stew.”

The one settling the baby in addressed the two older boys sternly. “Best behavior, right boys?” The children, who looked to be about seven and five, nodded seriously. “You sure we can bring kids in here, Billy? It’s rather …” he turned and asked redheaded man who had first spoken, all the while
warily eyeing the giant wall of betting odds for Zoilus Dorbel’s still-awaited demise.

Harry cringed when he read things like “Eviscerated by Filch,” and “Beheaded or Death by Amputation” from the perspective of a father of young children.

Thankfully Ab and Pel had outfitted the Demise Wall, as the patrons had taken to calling it, with a long gray curtain that could be pulled closed if the wrong sort of visitor entered the pub. Harry quickly walked over and shut the drapes before turning and smiling at the packed front table.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “Kids are welcome in here this early in the day, but we don’t normally expect them.”

The concerned father gave him a polite smile and Harry started as he recollected the worn-out Billywigs shirt that still resided in the stable. *It’s Mr. Weasley!* After a moment of anxious worrying that Mr. Weasley would remember him from his arrival, Harry realized that the odds of that were slim. He looked fairly different than he had back in 1976. *And the baby must be Percy … it has been a bit more than a year and a half since I arrived, hasn’t it?*

The man Mr. Weasley had called Billy, a balding redhead who looked to be in his thirties and was clearly related to Arthur, gave him a curious look. “Those were betting odds, yeah? Who’re you all betting on to die?”

Harry laughed nervously, watching Mr. Weasley glance at Bill and Charlie with a frown. Leaning in closely to the man so that the kids couldn’t overhear, he answered in a low voice, “Well, the Defense position at the school doesn’t have a great history of professors actually finishing out the year, and this year’s guy has offended a bunch of folks, so … the pub started it as kind of a joke.”

Billy laughed heartily, as did the other, younger redhead who sat next to him and sported a big grin nearly hidden under what Harry could only classify as the most 1970s chevron mustache he had ever seen. Mustache then whispered Harry’s reply to the fourth adult, a rather handsome young man with a close-cropped red beard, who smiled slightly.

“Anyway, welcome to the Hog’s Head. You gentlemen hungry or just thirsty?”

Asking a troupe of Weasleys and relations if they were hungry was apparently the magic question, as Harry soon found himself elbow deep in sandwiches in the kitchen. Thankfully Guin had prepared a few loaves of fresh bread and homemade mayonnaise the day before, so the tray laden with meat and cheese sandwiches that he finally heaved back up to the pub was better fare than the Head normally offered. Harry could admit to himself that he wanted Mr. Weasley to leave with a good opinion of the place.

The Weasley table was loud, boisterous, and quite a bit of fun to watch. After a while Harry gathered that Billy was Arthur’s older brother – he wondered if this was the same Uncle Bilius whom Ron had once told him had died after seeing a Grim – but the other two adults remained a mystery to him until near the end of their meal.

“So how long will this all take, Arthur, do you think?”

Mr. Weasley, who had been attempting to clean Percy (the child had thought it a good idea to liberally smear cheese in his ears – a far cry from the fastidious boy Harry had known), sighed and shook his head. “No telling. Bill took two days, Charlie three hours, and Percy about, I don’t recall, fifteen or so.”

Mustache groaned. “Ugh, it’s already *been* twelve hours! This is getting *boring.*”
Young Bill and Charlie immediately piped up their agreement.

“Thank you, Fabian, for setting such a wonderful example for your nephews,” Mr. Weasley remarked dryly.

“Well is there any way we can hurry her up? I have a date tonight and need to know if I should cancel it!”

Red Beard had been silent most of the meal but now finally piped up, “I’m sure our sister would appreciate hearing about your impatience to meet the newest addition to the family.”

Mustache – whose name was apparently Fabian – turned and looked at Beard in mock-horror. “You’d tell her? Traitor! My own brother!”

Okay, now I think I’ve got it, mused Harry. Red Beard and Mustache, Fabian that is, must be Mrs. Weasley’s brothers, so they’re Mr. Weasley’s brothers-in-law … and it seems like they’re waiting on her to have a baby – oh shit! Tomorrow’s the first of April … He did some quick calculations in his head and had to dig his nails into his palms to repress his grin. Oh Merlin, it’s them. It’s gotta be!

Fred and George Weasley are on their way.

Harry buried his head in the Prophet to hide the smile that refused to be smothered and daydreamed a bit about the future antics of toddler-aged Weasley twins. He didn’t look up until he heard some of the chairs scraping the floor.

“You gentlemen headed out?” he called from the bar as he saw Billy and the two older boys standing up.

The man grinned at Harry. “We three are – I’m taking my nephews here over to Zonko’s to get them things to properly welcome their new brother or sister, but the rest of these jokers get to stay and have a few pints without me,” he lamented.

“Well that’s what you get for what you did the last time you got your hands on Firewhiskey,” Arthur bit back. “We’re just lucky the hag, that kneazle breeder, and the barrister didn’t press charges!” The others laughed. “Consider this your penance, brother.”

As the pouting man left the bar with Bill and Charlie in tow, Harry overheard him whisper to the boys, “and let’s also get some things to use on your old dad, eh boys?”

“So, what’ll you be having then?” Harry asked the remaining men and then hurried off to pour their stouts. On a whim, he added three shots of Firewhiskey to his tray.

Red Beard arched an eyebrow when Harry set out the shots and the younger wizard shrugged. “Sounds like you all are waiting on a baby to be born, yeah? These are on the house – congratulations and good luck, sir!” he smiled at Mr. Weasley.

The man wavered for a moment, casting a glance at Percy, who had fallen asleep and was creating an impressive puddle of drool on his chest. “Oh why not?” Arthur surrendered. “But come, join us!”

Harry gave a surprised smile and returned a few moments later with his own shot. “To your new arrivals, sir!”

After the four had downed their Firewhiskey – Mr. Weasley sputtered impressively – the lanky one called Fabian gave Harry a strange look. “You made it plural – you said to the new arrivals.”
Oops.

Harry cocked his head. “Did I? Slip of the tongue, I guess. You gentlemen let me know when you need another pint, yeah?”

The young wizard retreated quickly to the bar and set up his customary drink for Wigol, who had shuffled in mid-toast.

All patrons fed and watered, Harry started checking the stock of alcohol behind the bar in preparation for the Thursday night crowd that would start shuffling in later that evening. Twenty minutes or so later, he looked up to find Red Beard staring at him. They probably need refills, he thought as he walked over.

“Up for another round?”

Mr. Weasley looked regretful as he instead pulled out coins to settle their bill and the other men stood up. “I’m afraid we should go back to my home and wait for the baby. It can’t be much longer now.”

It’s only three in the afternoon. They won’t be born for at least another nine hours. Looks like the Weasleys are in for a long night.

Poor Molly.

“Cheers then, and good luck.” Before Harry could turn and walk away, Fabian grabbed his arm.

“Hold up a moment mate. You work here long?”

The dark haired wizard paused, wary. “Long enough. Why?”

“You know who owns the lot next door? The one with the burned-out building?”

Harry frowned. “Actually no, I don’t. You could come back another day and ask Aberforth – he owns the Head – or maybe check with Gringotts, I suppose.”

The thin man nodded thoughtfully at his brother. “Thanks mate. And thanks for the shots.”

Harry smiled and nodded at the group. As he walked over to the bar he could have sworn he felt eyes on his back as the Weasleys trooped out. Wigol was giggling softly.

“What so funny Wig?”

The old man favored him with a toothless grin. “Awhrry, yera goo’ la’, tha’ ye ar,” was all he said before more giggles burbled out.

“What? What does that mean?” The man just laughed into his beer. “Dammit Wig, what?!”

1 April, 1978

It really is a day for twins, I guess, Harry thought as he looked at his ruined trousers and tried to figure out the best spells to remove ergh, placenta.
That morning he and Ab had found a very fat Goat angrily pawing the ground and butting her head up against the stable wall.

“Figured it’d be happenin’ bout now,” the old man grumbled. “Keep watch but leave her alone or she’ll take your hand off, lad.” He walked off muttering something about getting some towels and Harry letting him know if he had any problems.

“Huh?”

Fifteen minutes later, Harry’s confusion was replaced by alarm when he suddenly spied a … bloody bubble with hooves, of all things, coming out of Goat’s –

Oh that’s not right!

“Ab …?”

“Ab!”

“AB! Dammit, there are … there are things happening here, man!”

And then there was a baby goat on the ground.

“Holy fuck!” Harry grabbed a towel that Ab must have dropped off at some point and started cleaning off the little thing.

Goat didn’t seem much relieved, he noticed as he rocked the towel-swaddled kid. Am I supposed to swaddle baby goats?

A few minutes later another bloody bubble thing appeared in Goat’s … personal area – the sense of worldliness that Harry had been acquiring since arriving at the Head did not extend to caprine vulvas, it seemed – and he gently laid the goat he was holding down to grab another towel.

How many babies do goats even have at a time?

Apparently two, at least in this instance, he decided fifteen minutes later as he watched the twins latch onto a rather exhausted and irritated looking Goat and wondered how to get placenta out of denim.

Ab finally waltzed in around then. “Oh, she’s done already. Good job girl,” he praised with supreme calm.

“Yeah, thanks for all the bloody help!” Harry exclaimed.

The older man shrugged. “Figured you had it in hand. The oaf told me you helped that thestral deliver last summer, after all.”

Harry paused. “Well, yeah, I mean, I did. But … but thestrals are magic and nearly bloodless. Colin’s sister didn’t come out nearly so, er … wet.” He helplessly reviewed his soaked trousers. “Are babies usually so, I dunno, gooey?”

Ab snorted. “Ruddy fool. Get yourself cleaned up and come down to the pub. We gotta think of names … you’re in charge of it, since you helped her.” As he made to leave he barked over his shoulder, “And for fuck’s sake, you better think of something better than Goat this time or I’ll have your balls for it!”

Twenty minutes later, Harry and Ab sat at the bar whilst the divination gamblers argued about what
seemed to be an inventor whose life was saved by an enraptured wraith or some such rot.

“Er… how about uh, Bob and … Cindy?”

Ab glared at him. “I ain’t callin’ such a noble creature Bob.”

“Okay, okay …” Harry wracked his brains for more acceptable names. “Errol and Crookshanks?”

“Which one’s for the doe?”

Harry frowned. “Oh. Good point.”

Ab scowled. “If you ever become a father, do your kids and favor and let someone else pick the names, boy.”

_Twin names. Twin names. What are cool 1970s twin names for goats?_

He snapped his fingers. “Got it! Luke and Leia. They’re perfect!”

Ab shrugged, which was probably about the best he could hope for, but Professor Pemphredo broke in from her table with a frown. “Hardly appropriate names for siblings, little Devil! I assure you, the famous Luke and Leia whom I’m sure you’re referencing are destined to be epic lovers!”

Harry brightened. Sure, the Dursleys had never actually let him watch _Star Wars_, but one can’t be a kid at primary in the 1980s without being made intimately familiar with the major plot points.

“Really, Professor? Care to make a wager on that?” His grin was positively devilish.

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**10 April, 1978**

It was a beautiful afternoon when Harry left Hogwarts, having spent the morning learning more about poisons and emergency treatments from Poppy and then feeding Hagrid’s menagerie. His stomach fluttered whenever he thought about the big man, off tromping somewhere through the continent and trying to play diplomat to giants.

Still, it was hard to be weighed down by anxiety on such a lush spring day. Harry walked back towards the Head with a spring in his step, looking forward to spending an hour or so with Luke and Leia, who were just ridiculously adorable. And alarmingly energetic. Goat, he was sure, would appreciate a bit of time to herself.

As he rounded the bend off High Street, the sight of three redheaded men staring at the ruin next to Head greeted him.

“I can’t believe you two actually did it,” Arthur Weasley said in both wonder and horror. “Are you insane?”

The lanky, mustachioed one called Fabian clapped his brother-in-law on the back. “You just can’t imagine it because those twins of yours haven’t let you sleep in days.”

Mr. Weasley nodded with a moan. “If one’s asleep, the other’s awake and crying, and then he wakes up Percy, who just can’t stand to have anything interrupted, and then he cries and wakes up the rest
of the house! In fact, the only one who can sleep through all the racket is the other twin! It’s not fair.”

Red Beard, the other brother, clapped Mr. Weasley on the shoulder and said something in a low voice.

“We—ell,” Mr. Weasley hawed, “I really do hate to leave Molly and her cousin alone with all the boys … but okay, I need it. I’ll go back to your place for a bit. But please, make sure I’m awake by five!” A moment later the exhausted father disapparated.

The two brothers continued gazing at the empty lot and talking in low voices as Harry approached to head into the pub.

“Afternoon,” he nodded politely as he passed the men. Sure, he was curious why they were so interested in place, but he’d been around Ab for long enough to appreciate the value of minding your business.

Fabian distractedly returned his greeting, and Red Beard gave a tight smile but said nothing.

Twenty minutes later Harry was chatting with Nappy and Dalcop, who’d skipped out on work at the Ministry even earlier than normal, when the two redheads entered the pub and took a booth across the room. The bearded one immediately spread out parchments while Fabian enthused to him in a low voice.

He stared at the brothers for a few moments before heading over to get their order. Something about the tilt of Fabian’s face or the way he moved his hand as he spoke in excitement reminded him of the twins even though his thin build seemed more reminiscent of Bill and Percy. The other brother … Harry looked at him closely. His chin-length hair waved and curled rather like Mrs. Weasley’s, but his tall frame was stockier than most of the more lithe Weasley boys, though he didn’t boast the bulging muscles of Ron’s brother Charlie.

Yet something seemed different about him in comparison to the Weasleys Harry knew, something more than just the fact that he had a beard, and it was difficult for him to identify. *It has to do with his eyes, at least in part, the young man mused. None of the Weasleys have gray eyes, I don’t think.* And his taciturnity was hardly a typical Weasley characteristic, he added to himself.

*Why did Ron never mention either of them to me?*

Shaking his head slightly, he shrugged internally and headed over to the brothers.

“Hi neighbor!” Fabian greeted him with a grin.

“Hi neighbor!” Fabian greeted him with a grin.

Harry cocked his head in confusion.

“That’s right, meet the newest additions to Hogsmeade!”

“Wait – did you buy the ruin next door?” *Why would anyone in their right mind want to buy that lot?* Harry’s disbelief must have infected his tone, as Red Beard gave a small snort.

Fabian’s smile widened. “We sure did. Going to build our place there! Figured out it’s cheaper to just buy the land, demolish what’s there, and build ourselves than to either wait for some other store to vacate its premises or to open in Diagon like we’d originally planned.”

Harry blinked. “Oh, you’re going to open a shop? What kind?”

Suddenly Fabian thrust his hand out and shook Harry’s own. “Well, I’m Fabian Prewett, and this is
my little brother Gideon, and we,” he puffed up importantly, “are in the time business!”

Nonplussed, Harry had no idea what to say to that sort of nonsense. *What the hell does that mean … Though in a way I suppose I could say the same about myself*, he admitted, thinking of the hefty bet he had made with Pemphredo regarding relationships in *Star Wars*.

“Fab, no matter how many times you say it, it isn’t funny,” Red Beard – apparently Gideon Prewett – chastised him quietly. Gideon turned to him. “We make clocks. Regular clocks as well as wrist-watches and pocket watches.” It was the most he had heard him speak, and Harry was struck by the softness of the man’s baritone.

“And this is why you aren’t in charge of marketing, little brother,” Fabian lamented with his hand to his temple. “They are so much more than just *clocks*. Any idiot, any Muggle, can make a *clock*, after all. We make … we make art that harnesses magic, time, and place!”

Harry must not have looked convinced by the sales pitch.

Fabian sighed but then rallied as he fished a large photograph out of the stack of parchment in front of his brother. “Take a look at this beauty! One of our first major innovative pieces, just finished it before Christmas. This clock doesn’t tell time, oh no, rather it reports on the well-being and current activity of every member of the owner’s immediate family!”

It was Mrs. Weasley’s clock, the one that had always hung in the main room of their home, that had spoons with pictures of each family member on it that pointed to things like ‘Quidditch,’ ‘school,’ ‘work,’ and, of course, ‘mortal peril.’ The picture Fabian was showing him only had five hands on it, for the Weasley parents and the three oldest boys.

*So that’s where the Weasley family clock came from.*

“I think it’s bloody brilliant,” Harry admitted honestly.

Fabian beamed – *God, his smile really looks like Ron’s* – and Gideon quirked a ghost of a smile.

“Thanks! We’ve got *tons* of ideas for clock-related inventions, and maybe eventually some other things, so we’re opening our shop here. Hey, Gid, show him the plans!”

The man’s enthusiasm was infectious as he talked Harry briefly through the drawings of their future premises. A nice, comfortably sized two-story building in the same style as the rest of the village, with the shop on the main floor and their apartment above. Harry especially liked the tall clock tower they planned to build high above the roof, though the two hadn’t decided what sort of clock – time-telling or otherwise – it should sport.

“Well, welcome to the neighborhood, I guess,” he grinned. “What are you gong to call your shop?”

The elder brother struck a dramatic pose. “Imagine this on a sign: ‘Prewetts’ Dangling Pendulums,’ with the slogan ‘You can’t get enough of our clocks!’”

As Harry floundered for something nice to say, Fabian rushed on “It’s funny, get it? See we’re making a play of ‘clocks’ on ‘cocks!’ And the name is supposed to make people think of penises, but it’s about clocks! See?”

Gideon sighed and looked at Harry. “It’s a work in progress.”

Harry bit back his smile. “Well, er – it *is* memorable,” he managed before heading to the bar to get them some pints.
For the next hour or so the young bartender continued to chat with the regulars, but he found his
gaze alighting upon the brothers Prewett several times. At one point Harry glanced up and caught
Gideon looking at him before the man simply turned back to his brother.

Harry found himself looking forward to having the clock shop next door, whatever its name.

20 April, 1978

“Ever-living-bloody-fuck!” Harry cursed and threw up his hands in frustration. “This is bloody
pointless!” He glared at the offending objects that were strewn out over the metal worktable.

From across the warehouse Myrtle sent him a bland look and tsked. “Ooh, such strong language,
Harry dear.”

“Well, you seriously need to find someone who actually knows something to try to do this,” Harry
complained in a voice just quiet enough so Myrtle couldn’t hear him. “Just because I can turn them
on and I know the word ‘frequency’ doesn’t mean I can do this MI-5 shit.”

To be fair, the whole thing had been Harry’s idea in the first place. He’d taken Myrtle’s offer to
enchant more dog tags – extra money was always welcome – and had gotten Ab’s blessing to
continue on as a part-time member of her little criminal empire. When Harry had told the man about
the enchanted bullets, Ab had just grunted that it seemed a fine and innocuous enough thing to do,
and hadn’t care a whit that the woman had stolen Harry’s idea.

“If you didn’t want her to copy you, you shouldn’t’a given her your rocks in the first place, lad,” he
had shrugged.

Dog tags were one thing, but this … a few weeks before he’d listened to Myrtle going on about
magical hacks she wanted to create on other muggle objects, particularly ways to detect incoming
magic. Harry had, innocently enough, asked if magic had a frequency, since some spells audibly
buzzed or sizzled.

Myrtle had immediately thought of the electromagnetic frequencies used in radio waves, and
somehow Harry ended up being asked by the crazy former-Ravenclaw to “cobble something
together for us, dear.”

She just had to go and bring up the continued disappearances of Muggleborn families, he groused.
She bloody knew that I’m soft on all that.

He had not made much in the way of progress.

Harry had, in fact, not made any progress at all. He was looking at the dismembered corpse of the
fourth radio Myrtle had given him to take apart and figure out, and he still hadn’t managed to even
put one of them back together again yet, let alone devise some ingenious magical frequency
electromagnetronic whatever-the-fuck tracker thingy.

The Point-Me rocks were simple. ‘Make rock hit thing,’ that was all. Easy. This … yeah, this isn’t
going to happen for me.

He sighed and swept the dismantled radio into a crate with the mangled bodies of its fallen comrades.
“Harry, can you come here please?” Myrtle called, as Dwight her tattooed, hulking henchman glowered. “I need someone to test just how violently the magical-repelling charms I layered in this letter-box react to wizards.”

Harry groaned. Whenever that evil mastermind said ‘please,’ he seemed to end up covered in bruises or worse.

“Oh, none of that, now!” Myrtle said brightly. “This is for science, after all!”

Later that night, after showering and rubbing copious amounts of bruise balm all over his discoloured, aching body – Myrtle was disappointed that her prototype for magical-repelling mailboxes was entirely too potent and would surely come to the notice of the Ministry as is – he trudged up the stairs to see if Quisby and Ab were busy enough to need his help.

*Rather dead night, then.*

It was slow enough that Ab had gone to the cellar to check stock, leaving Quisby to busy himself with thumbing through a pornographic magazine while barely glancing at the dozen or so patrons in the pub. The members of the regular crowd were all faithfully in attendance, as was Loch the werewolf and a few other semi-regulars, including, he noticed after a beat, the Prewett brothers. The two redheads were sitting as usual at one of the front tables going over parchments. Harry watched a lock of Gideon’s hair slowly escape the clip that held it back and curl around his jaw.

Magical construction, Harry had learned, worked at a fairly fast clip. They’d only bought the lot a week and a half before, but already the half-formed stone walls of the Prewetts’ shop were rising up, much to Ab’s dissatisfaction. He seemed to tolerate the brothers well enough – they were holding steady in the ‘fools’ category and hadn’t yet nudged very close to the ‘worthless pieces of shit’ class – but the workmen for the shop had taken to coming in for a late breakfast/early lunch, and their boisterous voices tended to wake the old man up.

Harry headed over to the bar and started refilling drinks, since Quisby didn’t seem to want to overtax himself. The next hour or so was spent in pleasant conversation, with Ab eventually joining some of the regulars who were playing cards.

Pel broke off his story about some Norwegian selkie’s illicit tryst with the Spanish Minister for Magic some years back when Fabian and Gideon wandered up to see if they could order some food.

“So this one told us about that bet you all have going on the Defense professor,” Fabian observed to Dalcop, Nappy, and Pel with a gesture to Harry. “How’s a guy get in on that, anyway?”

From his seat at the end at the card players’ table Wigol started to answer, but Pel saved everyone that pointlessness by interrupting the old man and explaining that bets had closed earlier in the year.

“Bad luck, that,” Fabian grinned. The mustachioed young man reviewed the long wall of possible demises. “You boys got pretty creative though, didn’t you? Piranhas? House elf revolutionaries? Damn …” He laughed. “Whoa, look at the short odds on that one – why do you all favor some squib killing the bloke, anyway?”

Nappy clamped Harry on the back. “Well, he pissed Harry here off somethin’ fierce earlier this year, and we all know what happens to folks who get on the wrong side a’ him!”
The brothers didn’t laugh with the rest of the regulars and the atmosphere began to dull into awkwardness.

“You’re a squib?” Gideon asked without intonation. The man stared at him, his gray eyes serious and penetrating.

It was like someone had turned the volume in the pub off, Harry thought.

Everyone cast apprehensive looks back and forth at him and the redhead. Quisby closed his magazine. Ab watched carefully, posture alert.

Harry managed to keep his tone neutral. “You have a problem with that?”

Shite. I like you. You’re Ron’s family. Don’t be a berk. Please.

A few beats passed before, “You’re a squib, and your name is Harry?”

Fabian whistled, the sound too shrill for the silent pub. “Wait – Merlin, are you the one that killed Macnair last year then?”

Without taking his eyes of the fathomless expression on the bearded brother’s face, Harry simply said “yes” in that same balanced voice.

He could feel some of the others getting ready to pull their wands, suspecting that they might have a repeat of the fight which had led to the whole debacle in the first place last year. The difference between the regulars’ reactions then and their behavior now filled Harry with a glow of affection and not a little pride. They have my back … Well, Quisby probably still doesn’t, but most of them do.

The sliver of a smile on Ab’s lips told him that the older man had noticed this as well.

Gideon kept staring at him and until he finally responded with a slight inclination of his head. “Well done, that was.” Harry let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “Should I bet on you killing this professor then?” the bearded young man deadpanned, though his eyes glinted with good-natured amusement.

Although Quisby openly scoffed, the rest of the bar filled with laughter that was probably fueled more by the alleviation of the mounting tension than by the actual humor in Gideon’s response.

“Nah,” Harry grinned. “Not unless he starts it, that is. Now, you gents said you wanted sandwiches, right?”

Ab caught his eye as he headed to the kitchens and gave him a nod and tight quirk of his lips. Well done, lad, Harry knew that look meant, and he flushed a bit with pride even as he sighed in relief that the Prewett brothers hadn’t turned out to be as openly dismissive of squibs as most of the wizarding world.

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23 April, 1978

It was fast approaching Harry’s eleven p.m. bar curfew, and the Head was packed to the gills with a Saturday night crowd considerably larger than normal. From the grumbling of the non-familiar faces,
The White Wyvern, a shady pub in Knockturn Alley that made the Head look like Madame Puddifoot’s, had been popped by Aurors looking for suspected dark wizards. They hadn’t made any arrests so far as anyone knew, but were rousting undesirables out of the area, especially vampires, werewolves, and wizards with dodgy pasts.

Naturally, most of rousted undesirables came to the Head rather than simply returning to their homes, lairs, dens, or whatnot.

Tensions were running high in the pub, Harry noted as he skittered between the crowd delivering drinks. The White Wyvern catered to a dangerous crowd, and some of the Head’s regular patrons were already involved in long-standing feuds with a handful of them. Sanguini, Panty, and the other regular vampires in particular scowled deeply at a black leather- and lace-clad group who sneered back at them with relish, while Nappy Clank had stormed out in fury when Harry served an innocuous looking old man whom he later caught trying to steal tankards from the kitchen. Ab had already broken up three fights, and Guin, who was helping while Quisby went on a date, kept fingering her cricket bat.

The Prewett brothers just ignored it all and sat at their customary table. The outside of their shop – still unnamed – was coming along nicely and they were getting ever closer to opening the business.

“Surprised you two can get anything done in this racket,” Harry remarked as he dropped off pints for the two men.

“Well, one of us can,” Gideon replied with an arched brow at Fabian. The elder Prewett, Harry noticed, was staring intently at an ethereal blonde in a dress of white lace among the regular vampires in Sanguini’s group.

Fabian licked his lips and grabbed his new pint. “Be back later, Gid.” Without another word he plastered a charming smile on his face and sauntered over to the hobnob with the undead.

Harry and Gideon watched as the man effortlessly insinuated himself into the crowd and began flirting outrageously.

“You know, I’m not entirely certain that’s a good idea,” Harry thoughtfully observed to Gideon as Fabian sidled up to the vampire. “They’re a really nice group, but –”

Gideon snorted. “Whatever you’re about to say doesn’t matter to Fabian. Long as a person’s pretty enough and has a pulse, he’ll be interested.”

Harry choked out a laugh, thoroughly tickled by the thought of Molly Weasley having such a promiscuous little brother. “Well, the pulse thing might be an issue then.” When Gideon frowned, Harry added “Vampire.”


*Fabian was a Gryffindor? Guess that’s not surprising.*

A tingle ran through his body as Harry felt Gideon’s keen stare on him. “What?”

“Just realized you never asked what House we were in. Strange.”

The younger wizard furrowed his brow. “What’s strange about that?”

Gideon shrugged. “It usually comes up in the first conversation you have with any new person you meet, that’s all. I guess people use it as a way to place a person, to get the measure of them.”
“Well I didn’t go to Hogwarts” – well, this Hogwarts – “and, I dunno, guess I’d rather get the measure of a person from talking to them than trust what a hat decided they were when they were eleven.”

The redhead nodded slowly and his lips twitched into a small smile. “So you’re not going to ask me now?”

“Nope. Don’t really care what you were in school,” Harry responded with a smile of his own, surprised to discover that he actually didn’t care. The days of Slytherins versus Gryffindors just seemed so far away.

“Well then, cheers Harry,” Gideon grinned broadly for the first time and tipped his beer towards Harry, who inexplicably felt his stomach flutter strangely.

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by a pair of firm hands cupping Harry’s arse from behind. He reacted without even thinking, whirling around and punching the groper hard in the jaw.

The man dropped, and the crowded pub buzzed in interest.

Harry had time to notice very tight black pants and a puffy shirt before Caffrey Burke was clamoring up to his feet and rubbing his face.

“Damn, love, nice reaction time.” He winced. “And a nice punch too.” Captain Burke shrugged and slung an arm around Harry, pulling him in close. “Just wanted to say hello, green eyes,” he murmured in low voice.

“Cock cut off, Caffrey!” came Ab’s roar from across the pub.

Harry firmly removed Burke’s arm. “It’s good to see you, Captain. Want a drink?” his tone clearly implying that Burke wouldn’t be getting anything that wasn’t on the menu.

“Tempting, but no. I’m just here to drop something off and chat up a few friends. But I’ll be sure to see you later.” He gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek before Harry could stop him and then disappeared into the crowd.

“Ruddy shit of a pirate,” the young man groused as he rubbed his hand. Punching people really hurts. Gideon was watching him with an unreadable expression. Harry gave him an awkward half-smile and murmured, “Back to work, let me know if you want another beer.”

A few minutes later he was back at the bar, loading up a tray of drinks that Ab had mixed. The old man tilted his head Gideon’s way. “Nice enough bloke, that one. Ain’t half a fool, I reckon.”

Harry followed the old man’s eyes with a thoughtful expression. “Yeah, he’s … I like him. A lot. Glad they’re opening up next door.”

As the younger wizard hurried off to deliver the round of drinks, Ab stared hard at the bearded Prewett, who in turn was alternating between glaring furtively at Caff Burke holding court near the door and watching the lad hand out drinks.

After a moment he sighed and shook his head, though a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth at the thought of his boy getting to act his age for once. “Merlin help me, but the hormones had to happen sometime, I s’pose,” he murmured to himself as he turned his gaze back to Harry. “But the lad’s got a fine head on his shoulders. A damn fine head.”
-On the Prewetts: canon tells us nothing of their ages or occupations. Most fanfics seem to cast them as first generation trickster versions of the Weasley twins (often being twins themselves). I’m actively avoiding doing this, though making them innovative craftsmen is a nod to that common trope.

It will eventually come out in the story, but I envision Molly as the eldest of the Prewett children. Molly was born in October of either 1949 or 1950 according to the wiki – I went with 1950, so she’s currently 28. I made Fabian born in March of 1955, making him just having turned 23. I put Gideon’s birthday in December of 1956, making him currently 21.
Much Less the World I Knew Became

Chapter Notes

Please note that I have added the ‘character death’ tag to this work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XX. Much Less the World I Knew Became (When Dead Men’s Teeth Bite Just to Blame)

1 May, 1978

Harry cursed himself. He’d spent his lunchtime and early afternoon tending Hagrid’s creatures while the man was still on the continent. Though he was hardly a novice at caring for the various beasts, Colin had been even more clingy than normal, insisting on following him around everywhere, and he’d been distracted enough to lose track of one of Hagrid’s nifflers. Of course the little beast found his way into the half-giant’s hut and had thoroughly ravaged it in his search for shiny objects. Harry had finally found it cuddling up to Hagrid’s bronze tankard, which had apparently been left half-full of ale judging by the stench of the niffler’s fur and breath.

Of all the days to get stuck here late!

Usually Aberforth wouldn’t have minded Harry’s tardiness, but today was a special, much-dreaded day. He’d balked the week before when Ab had informed him that they had to attend an annual review of his parole with his Auror overseers and some higher-ranking suit from the DMLE, all of whom were due come to the Head that afternoon. Alice had sent him a short, encouraging note firmly telling him not to worry a few days ago but, well, he was worried.

I always seem to say what I think when I’m around bureaucrats.

Saying what he thought, Ab had grilled into him for the last week, was a very bad idea. Although Alice made the meeting seem like a pro forma exercise, the old bartender had been more anxious. He’d even conscripted Quisby into manning the bar for the afternoon so that he could be with Harry for the whole thing. While the younger wizard didn’t relish the idea of the berk listening in (and likely snorting at inopportune moments), he was heartened that Aberforth was looking out for him. The man may trust him to handle disputes in the pub now and again, but even Harry could admit that he shouldn’t be trusted alone with the Ministry.

It was odd to think that it was just over a year ago that he’d stood in the Ministry courtroom, implied the Wizengamot was filled with Death Eater sympathizers, and essentially dared the most powerful people in the British wizarding world to give him the Dementor’s Kiss.

I can be really, really mental sometimes, he’d thought that morning, in just a little bit of awe over his own audacity. Ab was definitely right. I have more balls than brains. Probably too often.

But now he seemed to have neither balls nor brains, as he ran headlong down the path from Hogwarts towards the village.

I’m already late, I think. Fuck, I’m late! Stupid, stupid, stupid!
Even Colin seemed to have sensed his anxiety, as he accompanied him halfway home and cast worried glances as Harry became more and more terrified of the potential consequences of his tardiness.

His legs pumping hard, he made short work of the distance between the school and the village, sprinted down High Street to the turn onto Low Street, and didn’t even pause to give an answering wave to a bemused Fabian Prewett who was evaluating the continuing development of their new shop.

He barreled through the door to the pub, not considering that his sweaty, panting, frantic state might not give the best impression to the visitors from the DMLE.

“I’m so sorry I’m late!” he cried the moment he entered.

The pub was absolutely silent.

“Er – Hello?”

Where is everyone? he thought, his heart beginning to pump even faster now. He glanced at the clock above the bar.

*I’m almost thirty minutes late. They should definitely be here.*

...  

*Maybe they went to find me?*

He frowned.

And then Harry looked down.

...

*I don’t understand.*

...

Quisby had been out from behind the bar and heading towards the front door, it seemed, for his body lay sprawled in the middle of the public room. Harry blinked dumbly at the young man’s unseeing eyes and the gaping wound on his back that had gushed down to form a puddle of blood beneath him.

...

*I don’t understand.*

...

Beyond Quisby, Harry spied two more figures prone on the floor by a table. Some Auror he recognized from the year before – Hooch, his mind vaguely supplied – lay dead next to Oh God, that’s Goyle. The position of the man’s body made it look as if he’d been struck down while sitting in his chair.

The beefy Auror seemed smaller in death.

...
I don’t understand.

... 

And then Harry caught side of tatty grey robes bunched on the ground on the other side of the table.

No.

He found himself slowly circling round, as if he were a marionette and his limbs controlled by some brutally cruel puppeteer.

No.

Harry looked down at the old man below him who stared at the ceiling with steel blue eyes. There was no blood.

“Ab? Hey. Get up Ab.”

No.

Surely it was someone else speaking so calmly, because this wasn’t happening.

“Get up, Ab. Please.”

This isn’t happening.

“Please?” His voice cracked, and Ab did not get up.

And then Harry was on him, casting every diagnostic and healing spell his splintering mind could think of, screaming *Vulnera Sanentur*, the most advanced such spell Poppy had taught him, over and over as his voice broke and was cut to pieces by sobs.

This isn’t happening this isn’t happening this isn’t happening he was fine this isn’t happening this isn’t happening he was fine fine I used a corncockle this isn’t happening

But every spell he cast fizzled when it hit Ab, each attempt’s light fading to nothing. Poppy’s voice flitted through the haze of his horror. No healing spell can have any effect on a person who has passed, Harry.

His throat felt like he was screaming still. Maybe he was, he had no idea.

No no no no no no no no no no no no

Harry touched Ab’s face, frozen and calm, and then lurched to his feet, intent on ... on something, though he had no clear idea what. In his mind he was already on the street, screaming his denial and despair to all the village.

No no no no no no no no no no no no

What?

The gleam of something shiny on the bar counter lashed out and snagged his fraying mind like a whip. As he approached, his eyes widened in recognition.

A miniature version of the Triwizard Cup twinkled at him.
In front of it lay a single piece of parchment, the dark red ink and sharp handwriting all too familiar.

*Time’s up, Potter!*

His howling grief and denial for Ab hushed to a low, keening moan the moment Harry gazed at the Cup in pure shock.

*It’s Voldemort. Voldemort did this. Voldemort somehow found out about me. All Voldemort.*

*It’s always Voldemort.*

His despair gave way to a roaring fury that thundered through him, his magic, his soul, his *whatever* drowning in a flood of seething, boiling rage. Cedric Diggory’s too-young voice filtered over the rushing sound that filled his ears. *It’s a portkey, Harry. The cup is portkey!*

*Fuck him. Oh, fuck HIM!*

The parchment burned to ash in his hands under the searing force of his wrath.

Harry reached for the Cup.

*What are you, five kinds of stupid?* Ab exclaimed incredulously in his mind. *Only a moron walks head-on into what he knows is a trap, and you don’t strike me as a moron, lad.*

His hands were shaking and they wouldn’t stop.

*Ab’s right. I have to call the Aurors. That’s the smart thing to do. The Aurors will come and they’ll figure out –*

*The Aurors.*

Harry’s body wavered as his heart stuttered.

*Oh God.*

*Oh God.*

*...

Alice should be here too.*

*Alice should definitely be here. She would have come with Goyle.*

There were four half-empty teacups on the table.

He took off running through the pub, screaming her name and checking everywhere in the room (barely registering the body of the white- and purple-haired old woman who’d apparently been sitting in the corner booth when whatever happened took place), in the kitchens, the loos, the stable, *everywhere.*

Harry found himself back in the public room, staring at the Triwizard Cup.

*He took her.*

*Voldemort took Alice.*
He knows me. He knows I’ll come for my friends.

The fake Cup gleamed up at him, its very existence a taunt.

I should call the Aurors.

I should definitely call the Aurors.

Only a moron walks head-on into what he knows is a trap …

Harry surveyed the carnage in the bar. His soul railed that this simply wasn’t happening, but the steel at the core of him knew damn well it was. There was cold fury in every line of his young face, and his power radiated from him as though he were giving off a burning heat. (*)

Fuck all this.

“I love you Ab. I love you so much,” he whispered in a jagged voice. “But I told you once before, a long time ago. I’ll always … I’ll always choose head-on.”

Harry gripped his wand in his right hand as he reached out with the other and grasped the handle of the Triwizard Cup. He barely breathed as he felt the portkey activate.

Of course, he thought scathingly as the portkey deposited in the setting of so many of his nightmares. He didn’t need to look around to know that the dark, overgrown graveyard in which he stood was flanked by a hill graced with the outline of a fine old house. (*)

No waiting around this time.

As soon as he could move properly, he whipped his wand in a wide circle. “Concutio!” The seventh year curse sent out a sonic wave around Harry that would at least briefly incapacitate any opponents.

Bet you weren’t expecting that.

He took a quick second to look around and identify any enemies. Voldemort has to be here. Are the Death Eaters here already?

The graveyard was completely silent and no less eerie than it had been the first time, despite the daylight.

Auror red to his right caught his attention.

Oh fuck him.

Alice was tied to the very same gravestone as Harry had been when he was fourteen, her head lolling. Whether she had already been unconscious or her state was the result of Harry’s concussion hex, he couldn’t be sure.

He cast his eyes over the graveyard again. It was silent and still. There wasn’t even any birdsong, though it was a lovely May afternoon. Harry’s nerves bristled.

“Hominum Revelio”
They were alone.

Harry wanted to run over to the Auror but …

This is all wrong. He snapped up his best shield so that it covered him like a nearly-invisible, shimmering dome. I know this is a trap, but what’s he playing at? This is definitely all wro –

And then the ground beneath his feet exploded out in a shower of earth and stone.

Fuck, it’s dead people! he thought frantically as what felt like bony fingers shot up from below the surface and latched onto his legs and arms, trying to hold him fast. Casting only on instinct while he still had some control over his wand arm he managed to fire off an Incendio that set the – oh Jesus Merlin is that an arm?! – thing scrambling away. It wasn’t until one of the hard, brittle things wrapped around his wrist and then pierced right through his skin that he realized he wasn’t fighting the graveyard’s corpses but roots. The thin, sinewy roots of the nearby yew tree had come alive. They writhed, pulling him down to the earth, wrapping around him and – he screamed – burrowing right through his arms and legs to hold him fast and incapacitate him completely.

I’m not ready for this kind of fight, a calm voice inside his head remarked even as he fought fruitlessly against the possessed roots that rent his skin and muscle. I never trained to fight a tree that could fight back.

“How disappointing,” came a wheezing voice from off to his left.

Harry couldn’t turn his head much to see the newcomer, but that voice … That’s not Voldemort’s voice.

“Did better this time, that’s true. Nice concussion hex there, boy, though only effective if your enemy isn’t expecting you,” the man said patiently in a sickening parody of a teacher as he kicked the fake Triwizard Cup far from where Harry had dropped it. “And the revealing spell is easy enough to avoid. The shield was a pretty little thing, but it didn’t protect you entirely did it …Yes, not as good as I would have expected.” Harry heard a sigh then a sudden Expelliarmus ripped his wand from his frozen grip. “But, then again, I don’t think you’ve had near as much time as I’ve had to improve.”

“Who are you, what do you want?” he cried, trying to sound firm and confident.

“I want many things, most of which I’ll never receive,” the voice hissed in answer to his second question. “Though getting to have you is most welcome and so very, very sweet.”

“And why do you want me?” Harry asked, attempting to shift his hand just a little in the roots’ grip so he could aim his wandless Reducto at the man the moment he had a shot. “I’m nobody, just a squib who works at a pub!”

There was a long chuckle and the owner of the voice finally moved into his field of vision.

What? I … I know him …

The man looked nearly as old as Ab – older, really, and he’d obviously been living a rough life. Bent over with age, his ragged clothes hung listlessly on his rail-thin frame. Filthy gray hair streamed down his back, and the eyes that glared at him with a terrible, mad intelligence were a rheumy red that stood out against his pale face. Withered though he was, he had his wand pointed at Harry with a hand that did not shake.

I’ve definitely seen him before, but where? Where?
“Nobody, are you?” he said slowly in a hiss.

Hogsmeade! That’s where I’ve seen him! He’s the beggar who moved in sometime last year. The one we tried to give money to, the one Alice arrested that one time …

Why the hell would he of all people –

“I think we both that’s not true, don’t we?”

Harry just didn’t understand. “But why? Why do this to me, why capture an Auror? They’ll hunt you down, you must know that –”

“I’ve been waiting to get my hands on you for so very, very long, boy. Decades, and decades. I had thought – I had thought I’d come for the Mudblood bitch of a mother of yours, and strangle her in her bed while she was still a child. Even made it into her pretty purple bedroom one night about ten years ago. So sweetly she slept. And I knew that killing her then and putting an end to you just wouldn’t be delicious enough for me. Not near enough sweet.”

He licked his lips and smiled. Harry shuddered.

“And so I left again for a while, and I waited. Knew she’d come here, grow up, marry that Potter fuck, and then – and then, and then, and then –!” The man was coming unhinged with excitement. “And then she’d have you, and I’d find them no matter where they had hidden, I would, and I would rip you from her arms as she sobbed so sweetly, and you’d look at me, with those big green eyes, and I’d tear your fucking head clean off as she screamed and screamed and screamed. And that would be the end of the great Harry Potter!” He was panting now, his eyes gleaming and specks of drool dripping out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry was chilled to the bone.

He’s completely insane.

And he knows who I am.

“It was you who’s been leaving the notes all year,” he couldn’t stop himself from saying. “It was you all along but, but I’ve never even really met you! How could you know – why would you hate – I don’t understand!”

The man smiled a ghastly smile that made Harry react as if he’d drug his fingernails across a blackboard. “Because it’s all your fault, boy! All of it! Years of waiting, waiting and searching. I missed him in London, didn’t mean to, couldn’t help it, should have been there. And then years again and then decades, and I finally found him but then he didn’t – he didn’t – he didn’t want me, didn’t believe me, didn’t even let me explain! I’d have been closer to him than a father, would have been so much better than a father, if I could have gotten to him before, but I didn’t. But then I would have been the most trustworthy, the truest of his followers, but – he didn’t want me!” The man’s cry sounded as though knives were carving out his very soul.

Dear God, he truly is insane. This makes no sense, no sense at all. Harry gaped at the emaciated maniac. He murdered Ab. This fucker murdered Ab. And now he is going to kill both me and Alice.

Think.

Except Harry was turned the wrong way to even attempt to hit him with a wandless spell. He could move his hand a bit, but there was no way to aim anything at him.
But I can aim at Alice.

The man was pacing and speaking furiously, repeating over and over again the same sort of rubbish as he’d just told Harry.

Ignore him for a bit.

Harry was a dab-hand at high-power spells, ‘battle hammers,’ Ab called them, because they required tons of strength and little finesse. Today he needed to be gentler, defter. He stared hard at the knot of rope pinning Alice’s hands behind her back and slowly began summoning different parts of it just for a moment, every spell loosening the knot just a hair more.

Sweat trickled down his face. Being gentle was hard.

He was more than halfway to his goal, though Alice was still unconscious, when the man screamed so loudly that Harry had to turn his face back to him as best he could.

“I said fucking listen to me! It’s all your fault, dammit!”

“How the hell is whatever you’re talking about my fault!?” Harry shouted back. Ab’s dead because of this shit!

Spittle flew from the man’s mouth. “You were supposed to die, not come back! If you’d just died like you were supposed to, I would be with Him, and everything … everything would have been all right! But you just had to live!” Before Harry could respond the man trained his wand on him.

“Crucio!”

The roots cut into his skin as he writhed in agony in their unyielding grasp, the holes in his body that some had snaked through becoming even wider as his helpless movements widened the wounds. And still the spell didn’t lift. He screamed so hard – oh God, this is worse than Voldemort’s – that he felt like his throat was shredding itself on cut glass, his mind beginning to fray at the edges, sudden unbidden visions flashing before him. Crookshanks played with Hermione’s curls. Ron grinned at him in Divination. Sirius soared on the back of a Hippogriff, and –

And then the spell lifted and Harry sank into the grip of the tree, his mouth filled with blood.

“The Boy Who Lived,” the man spat in derision. “Don’t worry, we’ll play some more in a little while. But I think it’s about time I wake our dear friend Alice Longbottom up, don’t you? I must admit, I’ve been looking forward to this nearly as much as I am killing you.” He tipped Harry a wink. “Not often you get to torture the same little bitch twice for the first time!”

Through the haze of agony and terror, Harry felt a sudden deadly calm.

The same voice he’d heard last year when he’d realized Alice Fawley’s identity returned to him.

“… This man took part in the torture by use of the Cruciatus curse of the Auror Frank Longbottom and his wife,” said Igor Karkaroff.

Except the scene he’d viewed in Dumbledore’s pensieve continued for another moment this time.

“The name! Give me the wretched name,” Barty Crouch Senior cried.

Karkaroff grinned.

Harry’s stomach dropped.
“Oh my God,” he breathed. “You’re Barty Crouch Junior.”

The old man turned back to him and grinned. “What the hell?” he grinned brightly. “Alice can wait. Crucio!”

White agony edged with boiling red became his world.

There was no telling how much time had passed when Harry stumbled his way towards consciousness, but the sun was still shining down on him like some horrid joke, and a rolling, clumsy glance at Alice confirmed that she was in exactly the same position.

*Can’t – I c-can’t have been out that l-l-long*, he stuttered to himself.

Barty Crouch Jr. was watching him more calmly than before, wand still trained directly at his chest.

“Back again, Harry? I was a little worried that last one may have done the trick.” He scratched his matted head with his other hand. “I admit that you’re a surprise. I figured I’d have to be patient and wait for you to be born. Never expected you to show up now, and in Hogsmeade no less!”

*Gotta ke-keep him talking. Get Alice loose. If – if she wakes up, she can d-d-do something. She’s an Auror.*

“Sh-sure didn’t expect to see you either, B-Barty,” Harry managed to choke out in a casual voice that was belied by the racking agony that echoed in his chest.

The old man gave a mirthless laugh. “Well, you know what they say, the price is fixed!”

Harry suddenly remembered the information that Pel had found on Glinda Gudgeon earlier that winter. “Oh G-God, of course! You – you were Kissed too. The Deh-Dementors, they sent you here!”

“Soul for a soul, eh boy?”

The conversation with Pel and Ab (no, don’t think about Ab right now) came back to him.

*In fact, the most recent Kiss I could find was in Britaain in 1912.*

“You – you w-woke up in 1912, didn’t you?”

Crouch’s ancient body whipped around so fast Harry was surprised he didn’t fall. “How do you know that?” he hissed.

*I have to keep him talking.*

“Wh-what did you d-do all this time?”

The man snorted. “You want story-time, Harry? Eh? I’m not that stupid, and don’t think you’re going to slink away from this place twice on luck, boy.” He grinned that same insane smile. “I waited. I tried. I tried … but, well, have you figured out this isn’t the same world?”

When Harry nodded, Crouch pulled a slightly impressed face. “It took me … longer. I got an Outstanding in History of Magic, for fuck’s sake! Things were supposed to be different! I knew they
were supposed to be different.” He spat on the ground. “Come to think of it, no reason I’m the Barty Crouch you knew in your world. Our worlds could just be similar enough that things between us played out the same.” He sighed. “But that theory shit is so boring now. I’m too fucking old to care.”

The man sat down against the yew tree and briefly closed his eyes.

Harry’s shaking had subsided just enough that he could cast a few quick summoning charms and loosen Alice’s bonds just a bit more.

“Like I said, I waited,” Crouch spoke out suddenly. “Waited for Him, first. Was gonna get him, raise him right, raise him strong. But I … it’s not the same world see. And then it was too late by the time I could go find him again.”

Accio rope, Accio rope, Accio rope, Harry silently intoned, willing just the barest millimeter to twist this way or that.

“And then he had become who he was meant to become. The Dark Lord. And I journeyed until I found him, and I went to pledge my allegiance, to become His again, his most faithful but …”

Harry couldn’t help himself and paused in his silent incantations. “But what?”

Crouch turned to him with eyes that were positively feral. “But he laughed at me! Said – said a broken down old man couldn’t fight in his ranks! Said I was useless because I had no money to give him, no connections! And then he turned me away!” The man began to sob. “I gave up everything for him! I got Kissed for him! And he couldn’t even see me.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Alice’s face begin to twitch and her eyelids fluttered.

“So all that was left was you. I knew one day I would revel in your death.” He started to laugh through his tears. “Never thought you would find yourself in the same spot as me and show up here like this … maybe I’ll get to kill you both, another little you in just a few more years! Either way, I can’t tell you how thankful I am that you’ve come, Harry.”

He desperately wanted to look at Alice, to see if she was awake yet, if she’d gotten her hands free, if she had a plan, but he didn’t dare lest Crouch follow his eyes.

“Oh … yes …” Electrified rapture suddenly illuminated the man’s face and shone brightly in his eyes. “After today the Dark Lord won’t ignore me. He won’t care about you. I don’t think he’d believe me that someone like you …” He made a dismissive gesture, “but I’ll show him that I can kill Aurors and even Dumbledore’s own fucking brother and get away with it! After today, the Dark Lord will know I’m not worthless, he’ll welcome me back, his most trusted servant!”

Crouch’s eyes bored into Harry. “And this time, you won’t even be a footnote, boy.” He walked over and caressed Harry’s face in a caricature of concern. Dammit, my hand still is pointed the wrong way! “Destiny’s a funny thing, isn’t it Harry?” His voice was soft as velvet. “To think, it’s taken me nearly seventy years, but we’re back where we started. And this time, we’ll do it all right, eh, Harry?”

The man stepped back, his face calm and beatific. “But let’s not neglect little Alice in all this, yes?” Harry looked at her quickly. Her hands were in a different position, he would swear it. “It’s been so very, very long since I heard her scream, and she does it rather well, I must say.” He turned and cast a Renervate.

Crouch had most likely expected Alice to wake slowly, groggy and confused. Instead, her eyes snapped open and a wand appeared fast as a whipcrack in her unbound left hand.
**“Confringo!”**

Harry couldn’t even blink as a neon blue light slammed into Crouch and pulverized his torso.

“F – fucking g-git,” Alice coughed and snapped a *Finite* at the roots imprisoning Harry. The adrenaline-fueled gleam that had briefly burned in her eyes dimmed as she crumpled into a heap in front of the gravestone, the wand clutched in her hand shaking.

The yew tree’s roots immediately withdrew and buried themselves once again in the earth, leaving half a dozen quarter- and dime-sized holes in Harry’s arms and legs that began soaking him in blood.

“K’in you move?,” the young Auror slurred. “If y-you can, che-check him. Make sure he’s – he’s d-dead.”

Harry nodded in a haze and half-stumbled, half-crawled the few meters to Crouch.

*He’s still alive.*

When Harry lurched over to discreetly retrieve his wand – Alice was still huddled many meters away with her eyes shut – the old man smirked with triumph even as he clutched at the gaping wounds in his stomach. He whispered so low Harry could barely hear him. “Oh, Harry. We both know you won’t kill a defenseless m –”

“*Repleo;*” Harry intoned in just as low a voice and stared down hard at Crouch. The man’s eyes narrowed in confusion for a moment and then bulged in horror when he began to feel the effects of the refilling charm Harry had cast on his liver, stomach, and kidneys. His hands briefly clawed at the grass as his organs filled with his own blood.

Barty Crouch Junior died gasping.

“Harry? Y’okay?" Alice asked, her voice vacant, too vacant.

It was a struggle to find his voice, but he choked out a reply. “Yeah … man’s dead. Nuh-nice shot.”

*With all the damage her blasting hex did, they’ll never even think to check his organs for weird damage they can’t explain.*

A frantic voice in his head started clamoring about how long Alice may have been awake, how much she might *know* that Harry didn’t want her to but he shut it out. *For now.*

Before he turned to make his torturous way over to the Auror, he carefully slid his wand into the arm holster next to the knife that Ab had given him for Christm –

*Oh God Ab. Oh God. Oh –*

With a viciousness that almost caused him physical pain he wrenched his mind away from that line of thought as well.

Thinking about anything other than their immediate survival was dangerous.

*We’re in Little Hangleton outside Voldemort’s dad’s old house. I don’t think he lived here in the past, but we still have to get the fuck out of here. Lose your shit later.*

“He-hell, kiddo, you l-lo-look like shit,” Alice groaned when he finally got to her.

Harry’s last vestiges of energy were fading. “Gotta get outta here, Alice. You can’t Apparate right
now, can you?” He didn’t care too much about revealing his magic at this point, but he knew there was no way he could Apparate, given his injuries.

She gave a wheezing laugh that brought up blood. “No,” she gasped. “But they’re pro-prob-prolly already on their way ‘r will be soon.” Through her haze, she must have noticed his confusion. “F-Frank made m-me. Sp-spare wand,” she half-smiled, moving her head a bit to indicate the wand in her left hand. “Put a ch-ch-charm on it. Aler-alerts him an’ tracks me if – if I u-use it.”

He could only nod and settle in next to her. A long gash on her thigh from a spell that Crouch must have cast before his arrival was bleeding freely, bleeding too much. He channeled what little strength he had to his hand and pressed down on it as firmly as he could, though the hole in that arm was starting to make the whole limb go numb and cold.

“You’re pretty hurt,” he mumbled dumbly at her. “Gonna – gonna die, y’think?


“St-still single.”

Alice let out a hysterical giggle that morphed into a bubble of blood.

Soon their trembles turned into uncontrollable shivers. They sat huddled together in silence. There wasn’t anything to say.

He blinked.

Frank Longbottom arrived at some point – Harry really couldn’t say when – along with a number of Aurors. He vaguely remarked them talking to him, trying to ask him and Alice questions, maybe casting a healing spell, he wasn’t sure, but the whole thing seemed deeply uninteresting.

. . .

He blinked.

One of the Aurors, who sounded a bit like Mad-Eye Moody, was saying something about shock settling in. Harry welcomed it and hoped the man was right. He was pretty sure that people in shock didn’t have to feel anything, and that sounded like a brilliant idea to him.

. . .

He blinked.

“Ab?” Harry whispered, the hope in his voice naked, the wonder raw. But the man in front of him had hair that was too white, his robes were too bright, and he called Harry “my boy,” not “boy” or “lad,” and that was just all wrong.

He opened his mouth to protest, to tell the man to go away and send him the real Ab, to tell him it wasn’t nice for people to pretend to be bartenders, but his lips weren’t working correctly and then he was whirling and whirling and whirling and the world turned white instead of the brown and gray of the Head.

. . .

He blinked.
A woman was speaking to him softly, touching his arms and legs – everything hurt so much but didn’t hurt at all – and brushing his hair out of his face. His eyes and mind focused just enough to recognize Poppy Pomfrey, to dispassionately observe that he must be in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. She started when she realized he was actually looking at her.

“Oh Harry. I’m so, so sorry, child.”

It was important that he tell her. That he tell someone. “Poppy? … I don’t … I don’t want to do this anymore. Please?”

And then she was saying something soft and kind and pointless. He blinked and retreated into himself.

3 May, 1978

“It’s good to see you more alert, Harry.”

The young man stared blankly at Albus Dumbledore and gave a jerky nod. Poppy had quietly excused herself when the headmaster had entered and solemnly drawn up a chair.

Dumbledore didn’t look at him, but stared into the same sort of nothingness as Harry was trying to wrap himself in like a cloak.

“Auror Fawley, I’m sure you’ll be glad to hear, is making steady progress in her recovery at St. Mungo’s. She suffered from several exposures to the Cruciatus curse, like yourself, as well as a number of other debilitating hexes.”

Harry absently nodded again.

“I – I do hope are not disquieted that you were brought to Hogwarts rather than Mungo’s for your care. I had thought … that you might be more comfortable here, given your friendship with our matron.”

Harry nodded. It seemed to be the only thing he could do today.

They sat in silence for some time.

Dumbledore finally sighed heavily. “I – I –” Harry felt him shake his head. “The Aurors have been investigating the events of … that day. You, of course, have been cleared of any wrongdoing.”

If Harry were alive, he would have snorted.

“The man responsible for the attack, whom Auror Fawley managed to eliminate despite her injuries, has been identified as one Balthazar Cross, an itinerant wizard with a rather checkered past who was apparently interested in joining Voldemort.”

_Balthazar Cross?_ Harry rolled the name in his mind in scorn. _Creative, Crouch._

“Strangely, the man bears what appears to be a Dark Mark – do you know of it? – Yes, well, he bears one on his arm, but any magic that may have been within it is inactive. We currently suspect that he was familiar with the sigil and applied to it himself rather than being an actual follower of the Dark Lord’s.” Dumbledore sighed. “Though questions about his Mark remain, we are nonetheless rather well-informed about the progression of … what happened in the Hog’s Head, and later in the
graveyard. In addition to the account of Auror Fawley, there is that of the other surviving eye witness —

He whipped towards Dumbledore so quickly that he aggravated the wounds in his torso and arms. Oh my God, please, please say –

The headmaster’s eyes widened and filled with remorse. “The eye witness Hippia George, Harry.”

There was bile in Harry’s throat.

“Yes, I believe you know Ms. George,” Dumbledore continued quickly, hardly oblivious to what his wording had done to the boy. “An older woman? Rather distinctive white and purple hair?”

He sighed and plowed on when Harry did not react. “Apparently Aurors Goyle and Hooch were sitting at a table with – with my brother … when Mr. Cross suddenly appeared from the back of the pub. He used the killing curse immediately on Aberforth, and then cutting curses on the Aurors.”

_Crouch shot Ab in the back_, Harry realized. _In the fucking back_. He could feel the fire in him burning, but pushed it down, pushed it away, smothered it into stillness.

“Young Mr. Rakefire attempted to flee through the front door of the pub, but was unsuccessful and hit with another cutting curse. Ms. George, on the other hand, was hit only with a stunning spell. We suspect, given his physical condition, that Cross had briefly worn himself out with so many high-powered spells and was forced to use something less draining for the moment.”

_I didn’t even check to see if she was alive._

The guilt for that would come, he dispassionately expected.

“Just prior to the attack, Auror Fawley had ascended to the second floor of the inn in order to check that you weren’t up there. Apparently you were running late for your meeting?”

Harry nodded as he noticed that the headmaster’s knuckles had grown white as he clutched his muted robes.

“Mr. Cross ambushed and successfully subdued her. He then, so far as we can tell, left a note and a rather odd object for you, and absconded to the graveyard in Little Hangleton with Auror Fawley, where he subjected her to considerable torture.”

He could feel Dumbledore’s eyes on him. _Maybe he already knows that’s Voldemort’s dad’s house_. _If he knows the grave was Tom Riddle’s …_ Harry forced himself to mentally shrug and struggled to sink back into his safe, dispassionate stupor.

“A replica of the old Triwizard Cup is an odd thing for the man to fixate on,” Dumbledore remarked thoughtfully. “Indeed, Auror Fawley informed us that the man was quite deranged. He believed he’d already tortured her once before, and that you, apparently, were the winner of the last Triwizard Tournament.”

Harry grunted derisively.

“Yes, I know. That would make you more than three centuries old. His madness was …”

Dumbledore floundered. “We are still looking into his background. No one in Hogsmeade knew or saw him until around this time last year. He’s apparently been living in a cave on the outskirts of —”

The headmaster’s eye’s widened when Harry flinched back, eyes wide.
“My cave? Was the fucker living in my cave?” It felt like Dumbledore’s words were being branded onto his skin.

The headmaster nodded with great reluctance. “I’m afraid so, my boy. At least since the winter.”

Harry looked down when he realized he’d clenched his fists so tightly that his nails were cutting into his palm.

“Harry,” Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Aberforth’s funer –”

He recoiled as if the headmaster had struck him.

Dumbledore sighed deeply. “Aberforth’s funeral is tomorrow. Poppy informs me that you are healed enough to attend before returning here to further convalesce. Of course, you do not have to, my boy, but –”

“I’m not your boy,” Harry bit out, the words spitting out of him unbidden and venomous. “I’m Ab’s boy.”

“I know, Harry. I know.” The old man shrugged helplessly and studied his hands. “You do not have to go, but I … I believe you should consider it. I can Apparate you there or, if you’re more comfortable otherwise, I’m sure Poppy would do so, or perhaps Mr. Pepst. If you want, Harry.”

No, I don’t want that!

He wanted to make everything in the world hurt as much as he did, wanted everyone to feel like they had tiny razor blades and rusty nails running through their veins, but Harry just gave a final jerky nod.

“I am truly sorry for your loss, Harry,” Dumbledore murmured, and then was gone.

I should have said the same thing to him. He was his brother. But I … I just don’t fucking care.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for potentially upsetting readers with this chapter.

For what it’s worth, I don’t go all George R.R. Martin in this story. Others will die, please don’t get me wrong, but I’m convinced that this is by leaps and bounds the most upsetting death in the entire story.

Citations
(*) Adapted from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, ch. 35
(*) Adapted from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, ch. 35
The Tale of the Three Sisters

XXI. The Tale of the Three Sisters

4 May, 1978

“It’s time to go, dear,” Poppy Pomfrey called softly from the other side of the privacy screen that surrounded his bed. “Are you dressed yet?”

Harry had no idea where Poppy had gotten the somber black and grey clothing that he was wearing. She had brought it this morning and shrunk it a bit to fit him, though he had protested listlessly that Ab wouldn’t care if he wore his own regular clothes to the man’s funeral. The matron had sighed and reminded Harry that his own clothing was torn and stained with so much blood that any cleaning charm would weaken the fabric to the point of falling apart.

She’d also ended a localized disillusionment charm that she’d place on the holster still strapped to his arm. His apathy was so profound that he hadn’t even thought to worry about the Aurors who’d come to the graveyard to rescue them finding his wand. Poppy had smiled without humor and assured him that no one had mentioned rolling up his sleeve and finding it.

Face grim and set, he stepped out from behind the screen and silently walked through the halls of the school with the matron.

After Disapparating together outside the gates – she Side-Alonged him, despite his proficiency – they reappeared in a grassy courtyard surrounded by quaint stone cottages.

“This is the Godric’s Hollow Apparition point,” Poppy explained to an uncaring Harry. “It’s a popular village for wizards, though it’s also Muggle, so we must be careful. All these houses,” she gestured towards those that squared in the garden, “are wizarding.” She kept her hand on his shoulders as she directed him through a stone archway onto a street that led to the church in the middle of the tiny village square.

The spring sun shone down on the chapel, making its stained glass windows sparkle like precious gems. Beyond it, Harry spied a lush green cemetery sprawling out behind a kissing gate. He scowled at the picturesque square, at the idyllic scene.

“It should be gray and cold and raining.

Entering, they spied a small crowd already seating itself in the white chairs set before a grave and casket. He wanted to ignore the casket, the people, everything, but he couldn’t stop himself from frowning at the dimensions of the place. Ab’s grave had ample space around it for the attendees, while all the other graves were packed closely together.

Pomfrey noticed his confusion. “There are temporary space-expansion charms set around the grave for the funeral, Harry. This way all can attend and there is no disrespect to the dead by having mourners tromping on their graves.”

He nodded vaguely and took a seat in the far corner of the back row even though Poppy seemed to want to lead him to the front seats. She sighed again and sat down next to him.

Looking to his left, he caught sight of the nearest gravestone, which he assumed would be right next to … to where Ab would be, once the charms wore off.

Ariana Honoria Dumbledore
25 April 1885 – 10 August 1899.

He almost smiled when he noticed a flower design graven around the edges of the simple, faded white stone. *At least he’ll be next to her. He’d like that.*

Unwilling to engage in a conversation with Poppy – who wouldn’t stop sending him solicitous glances – he surveyed the modest assembling crowd with dispassionate eyes. Nearly everyone in the first several rows shared two attributes: they were old and unfamiliar to him. Many were decked in elegant, expensive mourning robes. These men and women circulated amongst themselves, shaking hands and holding small conversations. Harry glared when he noticed a few groups of people smiling as they made small talk not two meters away from Ab’s *fucking coffin.*

*This feels like fucking politics.*

A possessive growl sounded low in his throat. *These people don’t know Ab. None of them were at the Head for Christmas, none of them came to see him, not in the last few years at least.*

He breathed a bit less furiously as his eyes traveled back from the front several rows and started alighting on faces he *did* recognize. Pel and Dalcop were sitting together, an extra seat between them. The old solicitor must have felt Harry’s glance because he turned around and motioned the young man to come and take the empty seat.

*He saved a place for me between them.*

For the first time since returning from the graveyard Harry felt like he might actually cry.

*Or punch something.*

He shook his head slightly at Pel, who nodded slowly.

Nappy Clank, Martial Sorner, Hippia George, and some of the other regulars were also scattered about, as was a number of shop owners from the village. Doc and Guin Dearborn were craning their necks, apparently searching for someone, while the Prewett brothers sat – Fabian being quiet for once – near the back on the opposite side of Harry.

His heart gave a strange little flutter when he caught sight of familiar long red hair. *Lily came?* His confusion deepened when he realized James sat next to her.

A stout man in thick velvet black dress robes rose impressively to deliver Aberforth’s eulogy. Harry had never seen him before, and the man, he realized in short order, clearly didn’t know Ab, not really. He said all sorts of empty things about Ab’s “greatness of spirit,” and about how he was a “universally beloved member of the Hogsmeade community.”

*Ever-living-fuck, lad,* Ab’s voice grumbled in his head. *Can’t believe they got this steamin’ pile a’ bastard to give my eulogy!*

He bit back a smile.

A few minutes later, Harry snorted *very* audibly and decided to stop listening when the man claimed that “dear Aberforth would have looked upon all who gathered to mourn his passing with a benevolent smile and heart full of love.”

Some in the front rows turned and glared at him, but he caught the sound of several people chuckling. Pel and Dalcop were laughing openly, and– *bloody Merlin!* – Albus Dumbledore himself was discreetly trying to hide his grinning appreciation for Harry’s reaction. The man was dressed...
somberly, which was probably why he hadn’t noticed him yet, and the pallor of his face only seemed to lift momentarily when Harry made known what he thought of the ridiculous eulogist.

It suddenly struck him that lots of people were missing. Understandably, none of the vampires were in attendance, though the young man almost smiled imagining Mr. Impressive Eulogy-Giver being forced to interact with someone real like Sanguini or Panty Wacco.

But so many of the other denizens of the Head weren’t there, he thought, just as Caffrey Burke and Myrtle Cramer plopped themselves down quietly in the seats on his other side. He didn’t catch Myrtle’s look, but Captain Burke, for once, had no smile on his face or mischievous glint in his eye. The press of the pirate on his left and the school nurse on his right was strangely comforting.

A rustling several meters away drew Harry’s attention. Half a dozen of the werewolves who frequented the Head stood in the shadow of a great elm, apparently paying their respects from a distance, given that they would hardly be welcomed by the majority of the attendees. Loch, the young werewolf who’d always been kind enough to Harry, met his eye and slowly inclined his head a bit. The small group then upturned bottles of Muggle beer they were holding, silently spilling libations in tribute to the barman who’d never discriminated against them.

“Thank you for that heartwarming tribute, Mayor Windgat.”

Harry jerked his attention back to the front, idly noting that Hogsmeade apparently had a mayor (*), even as Ab’s voice snorted appreciatively in his mind at the mild sarcasm hidden in the new, familiar speaker’s warm tone.

*Of course he’d have to give a speech, Ab said, his tone half exasperated, half fond. *Albus always had to have the last word.*

*Yeah, Harry thought to himself, that’s exactly what Ab would say.*

Albus Dumbledore had come to the fore and was looking sadly over the crowd. “There are many things I would like to say about my brother. In truth,” he smiled a bit, “I should like to go on at length about him. But Aberforth … anyone who knew Aberforth knows he was always a man who found satisfaction in blunt, honest words rather than the ornate turns of phrases that so delight the hearts of schoolteachers and politicians. Perhaps he had the right of it, after all.” He sighed thoughtfully. “So I shall curb myself today in his honor, and say simply that I loved my brother and I truly respect the man he was. Indeed, Aberforth was a good man, a principled man, a man better than most. He …”

Harry sat on the edge of his seat, his face white and eyes bright.

The headmaster closed his eyes as though he needed to steady himself. “He will be missed.” His words rustled through the cemetery like fallen leaves on the wind.

And then the speeches were over and the crowd was slowly filing past the open coffin set by the grave, some tossing flowers in front of it, others – folks who actually knew Ab – thinking along the same lines as the werewolves and pouring liberal amounts of liquor onto the ground near it. The front rows’ occupants looked scandalized, much to Myrtle and Burke’s amusement, if their gasping huffs of breath were any indication. Even Poppy seemed to be holding back a chuckle.

*I bet it smells like the Head by now up there.*

Harry almost smiled for a moment.

“No’mon, green eyes, lets go on up,” the Captain said quietly, taking Harry’s arm.
The young man just shook his head.

“Harry, you might regret not go –” Poppy began, but Harry cut her off.

“I regret a lot of things,” he said, surprised at the harshness of his own voice. “But I’ve already seen him dead. I don’t want to see him again like that.”

He could feel Poppy, Burke, and Myrtle sending significant looks to each other and wanted to deploy some of Ab’s favorite expletives, but all he did was sigh. “I’m fine here while you go up. Really.”

Although he only wanted to sit there alone, he did not get his wish, for as soon as the three left to make their way up to the front, many who had already paid their respects started filing past Harry on their way out of the cemetery. Some, like Hippia George and old Mrs. Flume, just gave him sympathetic looks or silently clasped his shoulder.

Others wanted to talk. Dalcop, Pel, Doc, Guin, Wig, Martial, Nappy, and others from the Head kept asking him how he was “feeling,” how he was “doing.”

*The best fucking person I’ve ever had in my life is fucking dead for no good reason. Because in another universe I had an enemy who somehow made it here and killed Ab and the others just to hurt me and to show Voldemort how fucking awesome he is. So I’m feeling great! I’m doing fucking awesome!* his mind kept shouting in response.

But he didn’t scream. He would nod dumbly if he had to, but otherwise the sea of sympathetic faces crashed against like a wave upon a rock. Everything they said sounded to him like they were speaking in Wigol Palter’s incomprehensible voice.

None of them were Ab, so none of them mattered.

At some point Lily approached with James, and he drew himself out of himself just enough to pay her a bit of mind. *She’s kind of my mum, after all.*

“I’m really sorry about what happened to Mr. Dumbledore,” Lily said quietly. “I won’t forget what he did for …,” she gave a nervous glance in James’ direction. “I won’t forget it.”

Harry gave an odd little half-nod, half-shrug when she briefly touched his shoulder and James murmured his own condolences. The scalding irony that his parents were consoling him at the funeral of the man who had been like his parent was not lost on him.

The Prewetts came by, Fabian saying something polite and pointless, Gideon briefly reaching out as though to comfort him but pulling his arm back at the last moment, a strange expression on his face.

At some point he realized Myrtle, Burke, and Poppy had returned. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Dumbledore look at him sadly and move in his direction with the mayor of Hogsmeade in tow.

“I want to go now,” he said abruptly, interrupting the conversations around him. “Wh-where am I going though, actually?” he continued in a smaller voice.

Poppy scoffed. “Back to the Hospital Wing, of course! I’m certainly of no mind to release you for at least another day or two, young man.”

He might have muttered goodbyes to the people who were still milling in his vicinity, but he wasn’t sure. Harry could feel a horrible, suffocating pain welling in his chest, sharp and dull, chilling and
burning all at the same time. It was time to go.

5 May, 1978

Harry had gone to bed the moment he arrived back in the Hospital wing, still dressed in the clothes Poppy had given him the day before. He’d heard her murmur that “Mr. Potter isn’t expecting the robes back anyway, dear.”

So they’d gotten James to donate some robes for him to wear to the funeral. Christ.

Although he had woken early the next morning, he’d simply rolled over and burrowed deeper into his blankets, willing himself not to wake.

Asleep was better.

He repeated the process several times that morning. When he awoke again a bit before noon Harry realized Poppy’s monitoring spells probably informed her whenever he roused himself however briefly, but she had apparently resolved not to bother him for the time being. Eventually, he sighed, she’d try to make him eat.

He rolled over and closed his eyes.

7 May, 1978

“I know you’re awake, my friend.”

The thick downy blanket that was currently covering Harry’s face apparently wasn’t shield enough to make Peloother go away. He knew that Pel had been in yesterday – or was it the day before? How long have I even been here? – but he had only been half awake when he heard the man conversing quietly with Poppy. Others had come as well. Doc. Guin. Others. Always talking in low tones, their eyes on his blankets feeling like burns.

Talking about me, I bet, he would grouse, before sinking deeper into both sleep and his linens.

“Harry. Please. This isn’t me just coming to see how you are. There are things we need to discuss.” Pel’s voice was heavy and serious.

“Have they decided to kill me or put me in Azkaban, then?” Harry’s voice slurred raggedly out from underneath the blanket. Honestly, he hadn’t even thought about possible repercussions he might face for being involved in such a mess.

He just wanted to say something hateful.

Pel sputtered in surprise. “What? What are you talking about? Of course not, didn’t Dumbledore tell you already? Fawley’s an’ George’s accounts were clear you aren’t guilty of anything.”

He gave sullen shrug that the old solicitor likely couldn’t see. “Then I don’t see what I have to talk about with anyone.”

“Harry,” the old solicitor said with some steel, “we need to talk. The matron is letting us use her office. Now I know you’re hurting, an’ I get that, I do. But frankly, my friend, there are things I need
to tell you, an’ things I bloody well deserve to hear. So you best get your arse outta that bed. Now.”

The old man’s tone momentarily surprised the self-pity out of Harry. “Fine then.” He extracted himself from his comfortable nest with obvious reluctance. As he moved, he got a whiff of his clothing and the linens. I stink.

Pel looked pale and tired, but the man’s eyes widened a bit when he saw Harry. I guess I look as bad as I smell.

They settled into soft butter yellow armchairs in Poppy’s small office after Pel had cast a few charms – Harry presumed they kept the conversation private – and made sure the walls were bare of portraits.

“I won’t insult you again by asking how you are,” the older man began. “That’s bloody obvious. But like I said, some things need to be said.” He heaved a sigh. “I dug up more information for you on Cross. But,” his voice hardened again, “before I tell you, you’re going to tell me who the fuck he really was, and why my friend is dead. And you’re going to do it right fucking now.”

Guilt niggled at the younger wizard and he found himself nodding and speaking before he’d made the conscious decision to do so. Every word felt like he was spitting out sawdust, but Pel was right. He deserved to know the truth.

“It was Barty Crouch Junior. The one from my world, that is. Or a world so close to mine that the difference wasn’t that important. He wanted to get revenge on me, and to get to torture Alice again.”

Pel looked like Harry’d punched him in the stomach. “What? What? … But, but he was so old, much older than I am, and our records for him go all the way back to –”

“ – to 1912, I’d expect, right?”

The man’s mouth dropped open as he nodded.

Harry’s ears were ringing oddly. He didn’t want to talk about this, he wanted to sleep, but he pushed on so that he could get it over with and return to his blankets. “You remember what else happened in 1912, I bet.”

The older man frowned in confusion before raising stricken eyes. “That’s the year … that’s the last time anyone we know of was Kissed by a Dementor.” Pel began to blink rapidly. “And – and your Crouch was Kissed! Just like you were! And … and you both ended up here. Crouch was just like Gudgeon – he showed up on the day that someone in our world was Kissed.” He snapped his fingers. “And like both you and Glinda Gudgeon, he showed up exactly where he was when he was Kissed!”

“Wait – Crouch was kissed at Hogwarts,” Harry interrupted.

“Exactly.” Pel took a small parchment book out of his pocket and flipped through his notes. “Far as I can find, the earliest record of Balthazar Cross is from summer of 1912, same day as the Kiss was administered to a prisoner in Azkaban. Anyway, the then-Charms professor, one Titania Fairward, called Aurors when she discovered an unknown man in his thirties wandering around the school. He apparently refused to explain his purpose for being there and was acting suspiciously. The man, who eventually identified himself as Balthazar Cross, was arrested an’ sentenced to a six month prison term for trespassing, resisting arrest, an’ attempted assault on the Auror who first detained him at the school.”

Harry was suddenly incredibly thankful that he’d not been in Hogwarts when he was Kissed, Merlin,
“After he got out of prison we have intermittent reports that paint the picture of him as an excessive gambler. He apparently would lay bets on just about anything, from the outcome of Quidditch matches to elections to verdicts handed down by the Wizengamot for higher-profile crimes.” Pel snorted. “I guess our worlds are just similar enough that he won about half the time, but different enough that he lost – badly – the rest of the time. From what I can tell, the man could never keep galleons in his pocket for long.”

Crouch’s hated voice sounded in Harry’s head. *I got an Outstanding in History of Magic, for fuck’s sake! Things were supposed to be different! I knew they were supposed to be different.*

The young man nodded slowly. “Yeah, that sounds right. He went on about how it took him awhile to figure out this wasn’t his world and that some events didn’t play out the same.”

“Merlin, a gambler’s nightmare,” Pel muttered. “Anyhow, by late in 1926 he must have gotten desperate for coin, because the fool attempted to rob Gringotts, of all things. The Crouch family vault to be precise, though now that I know his real name his actions make more sense. He made it in. Probably because he was actually a Crouch, I reckon. But in this case, Charis Crouch – lady was born a Black – was married to the patriarch at the time and had smothered the vault contents in extra Black family protection and alert charms. Bloke left the bank to find two squadrons of Aurors waiting for him.”

*Late 1926.*

Harry’s mind paused on that year, and he once again heard the old Crouch’s words echoing in his mind.

*I missed him in London, didn’t mean to, couldn’t help it, should have been there.*

*Waited for Him, first. Was gonna get him, raise him right, raise him strong.*

He closed his eyes and asked the question, the answer to which he suspected he already knew. “Pel, what else important happened around that time?”

Pel frowned and shifted in his seat. “I … I looked into the Dark Lord after hearing your story last year. Tom Riddle was born at the end of 1926. Think that’s relevant then?”

*I think I’m going to sick up.* “Crouch told me he’d wanted to adopt Voldemort and raise him right or something, but that he was too late.”

“He sure would have been. Cross – Crouch, that is – got twenty-five years in Azkaban for robbing the bank. He’s lucky the goblins didn’t just execute him. By the time he got out, Riddle would have long since grown up an’ left school.”

Pel shrugged as he looked over his remaining research. “Seems to have drifted to the continent for the next two decades, lots of minor arrests for fighting an’ whatnot. Looks like he was a vicious dueler when sober, but spent a lot of time drunk. Same story when he came back to Britain in the late ‘60s. Been living ‘round Knockturn most of the time.” The solicitor sighed. “Though he moved to Hogsmeade right after the first articles about your arrest an’ trial came out in the *Prophet.*”

A horrible, churning cold sank into Harry’s stomach. “He came here because of me, didn’t he?” His breathing quickened and his muscles felt too loose and too tight at the same time. “He saw my picture or something in the paper and came here. Ab’s dead because of me. Oh God. Oh God.”
“Are you going to make me slap the stupidity out of you, Harry?,” Pel growled. “Yes, he probably came to Hogsmeade because of you, but that does not mean you’re responsible for what happened to Aberforth any more than you’re responsible for Riddle killing your parents in your world!”

The man sat back, his eyes sad and his head shaking angrily. “You have to stop taking all the blame for every fucking thing that happens. For all you know, Ab didn’t even survive this long in your world – you said you’d never heard of him. All you know, something you did prolonged his life here. You keep thinking like this, you’ll drive yourself round the twist.”

Pel ran his hand through his hair, only to get his fingers stuck in tangles halfway down. He cursed and continued.

“Fact is, I’m pretty sure the bastard had three targets that day. Fawley’s report – if anyone asks I did not see it – says that the man was mumbling all sorts of crazy talk about how much he was looking forward to getting even with you an’ her, an’ how he kept going on about how he’d just had ‘vengeance enough’ on Dumbledore.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “So killing Ab was, what, to hurt the headmaster because of what my Albus Dumbledore let happen to him?”

Pel threw up his hands. “I don’t know Harry, not really, but it seems right. Fawley said the man claimed to have been watching the Head for months, waiting for you, her, an’ Ab to be together. Guess he figured it was finally time when he saw Fawley go in for a meeting with you an’ Ab.”

Shaking his head, Pel could only mutter “Lucky you were late that day, I’m thinking.”

“Yeah,” he echoed hollowly. “Lucky.”

The old man looked like he wanted to say something else, but changed his mind. Pel licked his lips nervously when he finally spoke again. “Look, Harry, you’re healed now. You should come back to the Head. Doc and Guin have been keeping the place going, but everyone’s worri –”

His stomach felt like it was being eaten by acid. “No!” Harry shouted, making both of them jump. “I can’t …” he continued in lower tones. “I mean, I don’t – I don’t. Please? I –?” The words stuck in his throat.

Pel pursed his lips and looked away. “I know. Okay. Oh Harry …” He clamped his hand gently on Harry’s shoulder, but the boy shranked back. That’s what Ab does! Not you! That’s Ab’s! Pel’s face fell. “But you’re missed, Harry.”

The young wizard couldn’t look at him as the old solicitor shuffled out of the office.

Some time later Madame Pomfrey entered, the sound of her footfall like a soft but implacable metronome. She was going to want him to do something.

“Poppy? Thanks so much for taking care of me,” he anticipated her, “but I’m healed and I … I really need to get going.”

Leaving Hogwarts that afternoon took longer than Harry would have liked. Poppy was a wonderful woman, but he had barely been able to keep from screaming at her as she reminded him to Floo her if he needed anything for the tenth time.

It was with relief that the school’s front door had finally closed behind him, though he had swiftly realized as he meandered down the path that he had no idea where he was going.
Not to the Head. That was certain.

For a half second he’d turned his path towards his cave before a wave of revulsion rushed through him and he nearly ended up vomiting in some shrubbery.

Not my cave. It was Crouch’s cave. No fucking way am I going back there.

Harry never made a conscious decision to head into the Forbidden Forest, at least not that he remembered, but had only a vague inclination to seek out Colin and find some quiet.

....

I think I’ve gone kind of mental, he mused some hours later as he watched the evening stars begin to glow through a break in the tree’s leaves.

Well, even in the wizarding world, deciding to live in a tree isn’t normal, Harry, Hermione’s voice helpfully pointed out.

Lass has the right of it, I reckon, Ab agreed. Merlin, boy, a tree? The vision of Ab shaking his head in mild disgust hung before his eyes for a moment, almost as real as the leaves around him.

He had found Colin taking a nap near the base of a giant, gnarled old penduculate oak whose trunk was thicker than several Hagrids and whose branches stretched impossibly wide and tall.

There were no other oaks at all in this part of the Forest, which was filled with all manner of coniferous, but no deciduous, specimens.

This sort of tree shouldn’t be here.

Well, neither should I.

What the hell? Why not?

And so Harry found himself climbing high up into the improbable tree.

When he was little he’d become quite proficient at scaling trees to avoid Dudley and his friends, and afternoons spent hiding among the branches of various trees in Little Whinging were some of his only fond childhood memories. In a tree, you’re in another world, a world where bad things can’t find you, he remembered firmly believing as a five or six year old. He’d eventually tired of climbing the great old oak, and had stopped on a comfortable branch. A quick sticking charm made sure he didn’t slip off.

As he watched the evening give way to the night, he fell asleep without meaning to do so, and slept the night without dreams.

8 May, 1978

When he awoke the next day he knew he should climb down and make decisions, but … he simply decided not to. The day passed in birdsong and flashes of greens and golds that eventually gave way to the indigo of evening.

I can’t survive on water from Aguamenti spells. Tomorrow I’ll climb down.

Probably.
9 May, 1978

The spell had struck him and Harry was halfway to the ground before he woke up and realized he was falling through the branches of the oak.

Before he could do much of anything he landed on the hard earth of the forest floor which, after a moment’s consideration, actually felt more like a fluffy pillow than anything else. *A cushioning charm?*

Looking around wildly, he spied … a picnic lunch spread out on a lavender blanket?

“Wha –?” His question was drowned out by the sudden soap and water that covered him from head to foot, scrubbing away several day’s worth of sweat and dirt.

“Apologies for the *Scourgify*, young man, but I can only stand so much a stench.”

Whirling around, Harry’s mouth dropped open when he saw his guest. The ancient woman’s white and purple hair was done up in long braids, and she wore a pale flowered dress under somber gray robes.

“Ms. George? What – what are doing here?”

The old woman regarded him thoughtfully. “Waiting for you to come down. Sit. Eat. I’ll explain.”

Perhaps he shouldn’t trust her, he thought fleetingly, but Ab was always sweet on her …

He sat.

“Do you know what family is, young man?” she asked conversationally as she began filling his plate with cold meats, cheeses, and fruit.

*Huh?*

“Not the basic definition, of course. Mummies and daddies and so on. Do you know how a real family is formed? Especially family for people who don’t have mummies and daddies?”

Harry had no idea what to say to this.

A ghost of a smile played on the old woman’s normally expressionless face. “I see you don’t. Or you don’t know you do. You see,” she settled back comfortably, conjuring herself a pillow, “you’ll find as you get older that people come in and out of your life like customers in a shop. Sometimes, you’ll meet someone – a friend, a lover, whatever – who seems the most important person who ever lived to you. At least for a while. And then you part, for whatever reason, and they become just a memory. This person was never family. No, lad, one day you’ll look back and realize that your truest family were those who entered your life, maybe even without you noticing much, and just stayed around as long as they could, long past all the others who entered in a blaze but whose importance to you gradually fizzled away.”

She watched the young man flounder, trying to figure out what she talking about, and sighed.

“Last of my family just died, lad.”
Harry's brows knit together. “Wait – are you saying you’re related to Ab, Ms. George?”

The crone cawed out a laugh. “I guess you aren’t really listening. No, we’re not related, not the way you’re thinking. But he’s been my family since I was young. And call me Hippia, please. So few do.”

“I – I still don’t understand, exactly. M – Hippia. But I’m … I’m sorry you lost Aberforth too.”

The woman just hummed neutrally. “I take it Ab never mentioned how he knows me, correct?” She snorted a light little breath of air when Harry nodded. “Figures. The old goat always harped on his brother for keeping secrets, but hardly shared anything of himself either.”

Shaking her head, she poured herself a glass of water. “Let me tell you how I met Aberforth Dumbledore, child. Perhaps … perhaps you’ll find something worthwhile in the telling.”

Part of Harry was grumbling internally that she should go away and mind her business, but the other part was already munching on cheese and watching her expectantly.

“I was lucky enough to have a wonderful family as a child. My mother and father ran a small wizarding farm, things we can’t get from Muggles – not that you see any such farms much these days – far outside of Hogsmeade. I had two sisters. One, the elder, was Capra.” She said the name with a soft smile. “Oh, how I idolized her. She was eight years older than I, beautiful and smart, compassionate and wickedly funny. My little sister, Galina, who was a year younger than me, was my best friend. It was a happy, quiet life.”

Harry wanted to roll his eyes.

“I don’t care about you. I don’t care about your past.

“ … had a girlfriend! A girlfriend!”

The mind boggled.

“Aberforth returned with Capra at the end of the school year and set to helping my father run the farm. It was … it was an idyllic summer. Golden and warm, and full of laughter, as I recall. Ab was such a welcome addition. At the time he was considering becoming an animal healer based at the farm, and really, you wouldn’t guess it, but he seemed to know how to heal the goats, horses – even the chickens – of any injury or illness.” Hippia smiled reminiscently. “For such a gruff man, he can be so tender around animals … and children,” she added, with a small nod at Harry.

Harry didn’t need to be told this twice. Ab had often tended sick goats, even going so far as to sleep in the stable if he was particularly worried about their health. And his treatment of Harry himself …

The young wizard shook his head. No, this wasn’t news to him at all.

“But then,” Hippia went on, “in early August … Capra fell from the loft in the barn. We … we didn’t know, didn’t find her for more than an hour.” The old woman gingerly dabbed at her eyes
with a handkerchief. “It was Ab and I who discovered her. She’d fallen, and landed on a rake that someone – I don’t know which of us – had left on the floor of the barn. I don’t think she was ever conscious after the fall. She never called for help …”

As he listened, Harry realized that this story was not going to have a happy ending. Aberforth had never mentioned a woman named Capra, after all.

“Poor Ab was beside himself, quite insane, to be honest. He didn’t – he didn’t know much about healing humans, only animals, see, and neither of us knew what to do. Papa was out for the day, and mum was sick …” The woman’s eyes seemed very far away. “Anyway, Ab did the only thing he could think of. Ridiculous, desperate, amazingly idiotic thing it was, we should have just Flooed St. Mungo’s, of course … You see, he’d never been prodigiously talented at Transfiguration, but I think blind panic spurred him on, and he did get his NEWT in it.” She let out a bitter little laugh. “He turned Capra into a goat so that he could try to heal her in a form he understood.”

No way. Harry blinked at the young Aberforth’s panicked stupidity. Oh fucking hell, Ab.

“And he was doing fairly well, truth be told. Like I said, he was extremely talented when it came to healing animals. I’m sure he meant to get her stabilized and then turn her back to her human form. But,” she sighed. “But it just wasn’t enough. The wounds were too severe and they’d gone unattended for too long. Capra died on that barn floor that day in August. And another chunk of Aberforth died with her.”

Shite. His stomach rolled.

“When we reported the death, poor Ab was arrested – it’s illegal to forcibly change someone into an animal, of course, despite his good intentions. He would have gotten off with a small fine and no one the wiser, except some muckraker for the Prophet was lurking about the DMLE when they brought him in. The next day that wretched rag printed a story that cast Aberforth as illegally charming an actual goat with whom he claimed to be in love.”

Harry’s jaw dropped.

“A few days later the paper printed a correction – probably Albus’ and my father’s doing – but the damage was done. It’s hard to recover when your lover has died and you’re smeared as the sort of man who fucks goats,” Hippia cackled in disgust.

A short silence stretched between them, as the old woman studied her hands.

“Aberforth left the farm as soon as he could. And a month later mum died. She’d already been ill, but really I think she just didn’t want to live without Capra and let it take her. I went off to Hogwarts. That next summer Papa caught Dragon Pox and died too. So it was just me and Galina. I was twelve, Gal was about to start at school, and we had no one.

Ministry was just about to place in separate homes of distant relatives we’d never even met when Aberforth Dumbledore strode onto the scene and somehow managed to get custody of us both. No idea how he did that, actually. He moved us all back to the farm and kept it going well enough to support me and Gal through school. Ab became our family, see?”

Harry nodded silently.

“Man just could never let a child be alone if he could help it, not after Ariana’s death, I think.” Hippia shook her head. “Oh Harry, as a child I noticed but never appreciated just how hard it was for Ab to return to us, to return to the farm. It was a place he’d started making his home, and then it
became the setting of his nightmare. I understand now why he ran away in the first year, because how could he walk through the fields, the house, the barn, and not be confronted with the ghost of Capra? But,” she smiled, “he did come back, and though I knew it hurt him, he faced it. If I regret anything, I regret never telling him that I understand what he went through, and that I appreciate it more than I can ever say.

“At any rate, once I graduated I moved to the continent to pursue my work. A year later, Gal left Hogwarts with a new husband, Archie Rakefire.” Harry’s eyes widened. “Archie was interested in farming, so Ab just handed over the whole place, but for his herd of goats, free of charge to the two of them and used his savings to buy a dilapidated pit of a pub in Hogsmeade, where’s he been ever since.

“Of course, he never stopped taking care of us. He would even watch Gal’s brood of boys if she was desperate, and he always came to my shows, whether they were in Paris, Rome, Prague, or wherever. Always.”

“What did you do for a living?” Harry asked, “Were you a singer or something?”

Hippia smiled. “Oh no. I’m a painter. I specialize in creating the best, most authentic wizarding portraits in the world.” Her smile grew wider. “I’m quite the real deal, young man. Indeed, if you ever need a laugh, just imagine Aberforth Dumbledore rubbing elbows with the puffed-up intelligentsia of Vienna or Florence. Why, you should have seen him when that wretched Muggle ‘modern art’ started infecting the wizarding scene!”

Harry snorted, easily envisioning Ab in his pub robes glaring flatly at the champagne-drinking denizens of the European art world. Then a thought hit him. Portrait painter?

_Ariana. I bet she painted Ariana._ Harry realized he’d never really thought about who might have painted her portrait, or any of the hundreds that populated the Hogwarts walls.

The old woman, however, continued. “At any rate, Ab was our family. He even kept my fool of a great-grand nephew on at the pub because he knew Gal would have wanted someone to watch over him, though the wretched boy always cared more for the Brewster side of his family than the Rakefire one.” Hippia sighed. “He was the last of the Rakefires, too. My sister’s boys were too brave for their own good. All but one were dead too young in Grindelwald’s war.”

The old woman stopped and gave Harry a long look as he sat still, mulling over this sad new history of Aberforth Dumbledore.

“And so I’m here, discharging the last of my duties to the last of my family. You and I? We aren’t family, young man, and we won’t be. Tomorrow I’m leaving Britain, and I doubt I’ll ever return … But,” she brought herself up crisply, “but Aberforth loved you. Like he loved me, like he loved Gal. And he sure as hell, child, wouldn’t want you to live in a bloody tree.”

He was already shaking his head. “I appreciate – I just can’t go back to the Head right –”

Hippia nodded. “I know. Just like Ab couldn’t go back to his home, not right away. But that doesn’t mean you can _never_ go back, and it doesn’t mean you have to live here of all places! And, since I’m Ab’s family, I’ve taken care of it. I mailed a letter to a friend of yours after the funeral. You were too wild-eyed _not_ to do something ridiculous, ill-advised, and maudlin like this. He should be arriving some time today, and I’ve sent him another letter letting him know _exactly_ where you are. So please don’t leave this glade, at least without speaking with him.”

She stood abruptly and Harry realized the picnic lunch had just vanished into her bag, though she
handed him a small sack filled with warm buttered bread and a cask of water. “To hold you over. Anyway, I do believe I’m off.” She tipped him a wink and tossed Colin a chunk of the lunch meat from her bag. “Good luck, dear.”

With a *pop* she was gone.

Some time later Harry had resumed his perch in the oak, lost in thought. He’d pondered Ab’s sad past for a while, thinking of all the little ways his early life seemed to have molded him into the man Harry knew.

But now … now his mind was on Quisby Rakefire.

A twinging thread of guilt wound through him, as he thought on the fact that he *hadn’t* spared a single thought for Quisby until this afternoon. Harry had seen his body sprawled on the floor of the Head, but all care and concern for anyone else had been completely eclipsed by his grief for Ab. Sure, he wouldn’t lie to himself and try to recast the young barman as somebody likeable. No, Quisby had been a whining jerk for all the time that Harry had known him.

But now he was dead. Dead really young, not all that much older than Cedric had been. He’d never get a chance to become something other than a prat.

It was all so horribly final.

Harry thought on all the secret amusement he had felt at Quisby’s dream to inherit the Three Broomsticks, back when he still believed this world to be his home. He had relished *knowing* that Rosmerta would get the pub, always figuring that Tab Brewster would just pass the young man over.

And now Quisby definitely would never inherit the ‘Sticks.

*I wonder if he died young in my world. If someone killed him.*

*If someone killed Ab.*

But his world, his *old* world, really didn’t matter anymore. He couldn’t go back there. And even if he could, even if there were still an Aberforth Dumbledore there – or a Quisby Rakefire – they wouldn’t be *his.*

*His* Ab was gone.

The wind rustled in the leaves and the sun shone on.

Far below him, Colin gave a little bark.

*Probably found a rabbit to eat.*

“’Lo? Ya up there, ‘Arry?”

Harry blinked.

“S’me, Hagrid … Lady who wrote ter me said ye’d be here. Harry?”

He sighed. “I’ll be down in a few minutes, Hagrid.” Without magic the descent was a fair bit trickier, but Harry managed it without breaking his neck.
Hagrid beamed at him, then schooled his expression into something more somber. Then his smile cracked through again, though he tried to smother it.

Watching, Harry almost felt like laughing as the giant man attempted to balance his apparent delight at seeing Harry with his sensitivity to his friend’s despair.

“S’good ter see ya, Harry.” Hagrid began, watching his friend’s face carefully. “I was sorry – real sorry – to hear ‘bout ol’ Ab. He’s good man, damn good man, an’ deserved better.”

Harry’s throat dried up.

“Anyhow, his friend, that Miss George, she wrote ter me the day a’ the funeral. Said ye could use me back, if I had the time. I was on that mission fer Dumbledore but, well, twasn’t goin’ so good anyways … so here I am.”

Seeing Hagrid was so much better than seeing Pel had been. Or seeing Dalcop or Doc or Guin or any of the others. Hagrid was … clean. Clean of the association with the Head, with Ab, that all the others carried on them. Sure, Hagrid went there in this world, but Harry had memories of the man that weren’t clouded with his home here.

“It’s … it’s really, really good to see you Hagrid,” he choked out sincerely.

Hagrid once again beamed and tried to restrain it. “I, er, well, don’t rightly know if Ab ever told ya, but, see, he had me sign some forms last year. Just in case, ya know.”

Harry’s brow furrowed.

“Just in case somethin’ happened ta him, I mean,” Hagrid rushed on. “Made me yer godfather, if ye want me, that is, though I think I’m supposed ter be called somethin’ like ‘secondary custodian’ or some such rot.”

Hagrid’s my godfather? Ab gave me a godfather?

A wild rush of emotions welled inside Harry as he tried to nod and smile at Hagrid. Warmth that Ab had cared that much. Love for Hagrid. Appreciation. A terrible, howling grief that things done ‘just in case’ now mattered.

He wanted to thank Hagrid, to tell him that of course, I’d love to have you as my godfather – not as a replacement for Sirius or Ab, but as his own person – thank you, Hagrid.

But when he opened his mouth the words didn’t come.

Instead a flood of hot, damnable, humiliating tears arrived in their place.

Wrenching, painful sobs tore through him, stealing his breath, his ability to think clearly. At some point he realized that Hagrid was sitting next to him on the forest floor, one of his great arms securely around Harry’s shoulders as he soaked the half-giant’s shirt with tears. He could distantly hear himself speaking – or shouting or whispering, he wasn’t sure – pointless, childish things. It’s not fair. I miss him. I want him back. I’ll do anything. I’m sorry. Please, please, I want him back were gasped out in a mindless loop. Hagrid seemed to be whispering comforting things, but they weren’t able to reach him, not really.

Harry never noticed when he wore himself out and fell asleep.

The half-giant sighed, and positioned Harry in his arms like a young child. “T’all work out in the
end, ‘Arry,” he muttered. “Things’ll be alright, ye’ll see. But fer now, let’s go home.”

The sun began to set as the groundskeeper carried the boy out of the Forbidden Forest towards his own little hut on the Hogwarts grounds.
XXII. Gathering Stones and Casting Them Away

21 May, 1978

Harry woke with a start from a nightmare that seemed to involve Draco Malfoy repeatedly dunking his head in a vat full of goo.

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he looked up and was promptly hit full in the face with a generous amount of drool. Judging from the slimy feel on other parts of his head, it was not the first time he had been targeted that morning.

“G’morning Stimpy,” Harry grumbled at the giant boarhound who was looking – and drooling – down at him expectantly. “Okay, okay, Merlin. Gimme a minute and I’ll play fetch with you, you ruddy tyrant.”

He and Hagrid’s dog had quickly established a routine after Harry had moved into the groundskeeper’s hut. Harry would wake up when Stimpy demanded and spend half an hour throwing a ball, stick, or whatever for him, or Stimpy would attempt to drown him in slobber until he pulled his arse out of bed and obliged him.

Harry wasn’t overly enthusiastic about this morning ritual, but found torture by drool a good motivator.

Casting his eyes about the hut, he could tell that Hagrid, as usual, had left early to feed one set of creatures or another.

Five minutes later he had washed his face and given in to Stimpy’s demands. The morning air was mild and calm as he threw a now slobber-covered stick for the great dog and thought about the last two weeks.

Living with Hagrid was … okay.

Really … okay.

Granted, a one room hut filled with various creatures was not exactly an ideal environment for a grieving sixteen year old, but aside from Hagrid’s snoring, Stimpy’s drooling, and the antics of Hagrid’s niffler and other creatures, it had been relatively peaceful. Sometimes Hagrid treated Harry too much like a wounded wild thing, his voice always gentle, his movements always deliberate. It made him feel kind of naked. Exposed. That in itself wasn’t so bad, because Harry knew in his bones that Hagrid understood, having lost his own dad as a teenager. But sometimes Harry just wanted to forget, to pretend everything was fine, and Hagrid’s understanding eyes held him captive to the unavoidable truth.

But really, Harry thought, being here is okay. Better than being in the Head. And Hagrid doesn’t make me talk about anything if I don’t want to.

Harry actually hadn’t really spoken much since moving to Hagrid’s. It seemed to disrupt the peace he’d been trying to achieve. He’d talk in a low tones with the half-giant sometimes, but … there just
wasn’t much he wanted to say.

Hagrid seemed to understand that.

He had taken to completely avoiding the students, usually by trekking into the Forbidden Forest or staying at the hut with a book and Hagrid’s more domesticated beasts during the day. While Hagrid usually ate in the Great Hall, someone had been sensitive enough to arrange for a house elf to deliver Harry’s meals. He had no interest in being a spectacle for the students.

At one point early on his friend – godfather, he’d correct himself – had alluded to disputes among the faculty as to whether he should even be allowed to live on the school grounds. Harry could easily imagine what Zoilus Dorbel had to say about that, but Hagrid, or more probably Dumbledore, had defended him. It didn’t really matter, Harry had shrugged. He was here and no one had bothered him yet. That was enough.

Except …

Except staying with Hagrid had showed him, more than anything else, that he couldn’t stay with Hagrid forever. His new godfather had been a godsend. Sure, his grief still felt like a leaden blanket that covered him completely and weighed him down almost to the point he felt like he couldn’t stand. The days with Hagrid, however, had made that horrible weight bearable.

But living with Hagrid didn’t feel like living in a home.

*It feels more like I’m living at Kings Cross. Between things. Temporary.*

*Waiting for something else.*

Harry sighed as he threw the stick again for Stimpy. Things were going to change, he could feel it. And they’d never go back to what they had been, no matter how much he wanted them to.

A nibbling feeling behind his knee drew his gaze downward. Little Luke the goat had taken to trying to munch on his denims much like his mother grazed on his hair.

Despite his long thoughts, he couldn’t help but smile at the little guy. Two days after he’d moved in with Hagrid, Goat had shown up with Luke and Leia in tow.

The ensuing battle between Goat and Stimpy had fallen short of epic, but was certainly amusing. Stimpy had taken great offense at the three goats’ attempted occupation of the hut, and absolutely refused to allow them to sleep in Harry’s lumpy little pillow bed. To be fair, it was actually Stimpy’s bed originally. Goat, in turn, was quite put out by the poor hospitality being offered her, and was less than thrilled with her new accommodations in a corner of the hippogriff paddock. She now often charged the dog when he least expected it, butting him so hard that he’d fall over.

Harry had been concerned about setting the goats up with the hippogriffs, but so far things in that realm had been peaceful. Luke had started imitating Harry, and now gave a funny little bob of his head whenever he encountered one of the much larger beasts. Leia was less respectful, but she seemed to have bonded with one of the grumpier hippogriffs, and now could often be found riding on Stormseeker’s back. (*) Goat, of course, had been manifestly unimpressed with the noble creatures and ignored them utterly.

“Morning Luke,” Harry murmured and bent over to scratch the little guy around the ears. “Ready for another day of existing?”
Later that evening, Hagrid found Harry on the far side of the Black Lake, feeding bits of bread to a flock of wild ganders that had cautiously approached him.

“’Lo, ‘Arry.” Hagrid frowned a bit as he watched the boy. “Tha’s strange … don’t see this type a’ geese in the summer, usually.” When Harry gave him a puzzled look, Hagrid went on. “These aren’t regular geese. Barnacle geese have got themselves some magic, ya know, said to be born from driftwood that’s lonesome. More likely ta bite yer fingers off than take food from ye.”

“Oh. Well, they seem nice enough to me, I guess,” Harry shrugged.

The half-giant watched in silence for several more minutes as the ganders jockeyed for position around Harry and then finally departed for the water when they were sated.

“We had some visitors today, ‘Arry. Though they was really lookin’ fer you.”

Harry said nothing.

“Pel Pepst and Caradoc Dearborn. They, er, really wanted ter talk.”

“Oh.”

Hagrid shuffled awkwardly. “Told ‘em I’d bring ye with me to the Three Broomsticks tomorrow. They want ter talk, and I’m thinking it’s important.”

“Oh.”

The half-giant held back his groan. Teenagers. “So ye’ll come with me then?”


Hagrid closed his eyes. “All right then.” He wanted to remind Harry that these people cared about him, that they were his friends, and that they were hurting from losing Aberforth too. But such things would probably only make the boy retreat into himself further. Instead, he lumbered over and took a seat next to Harry. They sat there for a long time, long after the sun had set, in companionable silence.

22 May, 1978

The afternoon of the following day found the half-giant leading a trudging Harry to Hogsmeade. When they passed the turn onto Low Street that Harry would normally have taken home, the hurt in him welled to actual physical pain. At the same time, he was grateful that Pel and Doc were sensitive enough to set their meeting at the Sticks and not the Head.

Meanwhile, most of the denizens of Hogsmeade who were out and about favored him with nods and sad smiles. Although the Daily Prophet had focused their sensationalized reports on what they dubbed “The Massacre at the Hog’s Head” upon the actions of “the heroic and beautiful Auror Fawley,” he had still rated a few mentions and the village itself was well aware that he’d gone to try to rescue the young Auror.

His stock was soaring in Hogsmeade, at least compared to this time the previous year. All it took was a bloody Death Eater raid and then this, he griped to himself.
Neither Doc nor Pel was present when Hagrid and Harry entered the nearly empty Three Broomsticks, but Madame Rosmerta quickly approached the pair.

“They’re upstairs,” she informed them with preamble. “I let them have the private room.” Harry realized that she looked a little pale, her makeup applied haphazardly. Then he remembered that her family had lost someone too.

“I’m – I’m sorry about Quisby, Rosmerta,” he said quietly.

She looked at him with misty eyes. “Thank you, Harry. We weren’t – well, weren’t close, but … Well, thank you, Harry. And I’m so very sorry about Aberforth. He was a good man.”

As he climbed the stairs to the second floor, Harry realized that, while Rosmerta had always been nice enough to him, this was probably the first time she’d actually called him by his name.

He could hear the murmur of several voices – way more than just Doc and Pel – behind the door to the meeting room. Harry cast a final look at Hagrid, almost asking if they really had to do this, but he stopped himself. Pel and Doc were his friends, and it wasn’t their fault they reminded Harry of what he had lost.

With a sigh he pushed open the door, shrugging off the comforting hand Hagrid had put on his shoulder.

The Three Broomsticks’ meeting room was more like a parlor than anything else. There were a few sets of tables and chairs scattered about, with a number of squashy armchairs filling the rest of the space. A cheerful fire crackled in the large fireplace in the corner.

Harry looked at the assembled crowd and was half grateful, half chagrined, that Hagrid was behind him and blocking the exit. He just wanted to run away.

Pel, Dalcop, Doc and Guin were sitting at one of tables, while Caffrey Burke sprawled across two armchairs and Myrtle Cramer lounged, feet up on a table, in a third. Wigol Palter was wandering about the room, peering at random baubles whose particular importance could likely only be known by him. The old man looked up and gave Harry a commiserating smile.

“Harry! Good to see you, lad,” Pel said, and motioned for the newcomers to find seats. Hagrid took up nearly another table, and Harry slid into the simple wooden chair next to him, feeling desperately uncomfortable.

“Oh, Harry, how are y –” Guin began, but cut herself off abruptly at a warning look from Pel.

Thank you, Pel. How the fuck do they think I am?

Pel took immediate control of the meeting, pulling a sheaf of parchment out of his satchel. “Thanks, all of you for coming. I know that this might be a bit unexpected, but there’s some things you all should know, because Aberforth thought it was important.”

Harry became very still. Please, I don’t care what this is about. I don’t want to do this.

“As most of you know,” Pel went on, “I was a solicitor for a long time, an’ I’ve served as Aberforth’s attorney for more than a decade. As such,” he paused and cleared his throat awkwardly, “as such, I am the executor of his estate, an’ in charge of making sure that his will is read and obeyed.”

Harry wanted to scream. I don’t want to do this!
“Now, there are some … irregularities with Ab’s will. Most importantly for us, you’ll note that we aren’t in the sort of official setting typically reserved for will readings. This is because Ab was quite clear that his will was not to be officially read and registered until July 31st, 1978, if he should pass before then.” Pel bit his lip, and continued in a much softer, much less official voice. “Which, of course, he has.”

He sighed and continued. “The reason that I’ve asked you all to come today – well, all except Wig over there, who just showed up – (Wigol flashed an impudent grin), is because I know the contents of the will, an’ you are all, I s’pose I can say, involved in it.”

Captain Burke lazily unwound his legs and sat up with mild interest. “And why did Ab want to wait until July 31st for his will to made public? Surely he had a will made for if he died after that date. Did it have a similar waiting period?”

Pel flicked a concerned glance at Harry. “Well, Mr. Burke –”

“Captain. Captain Burke.”

The old solicitor corrected himself with a roll of his eyes. “Well, Captain Burke, the answer to your second question is that no, the will he had completed should he die after July the thirty-first of this year did not have a waiting period. As for why this one does … well, that has much to do with young Harry here.”

Harry pursed his lips and looked at his hands.

“I meant to give you this yesterday, Harry, but Ab was firm that I had to place it in your hands, and your hands alone.” He pulled out a tightly-rolled parchment. “I suggest we give Harry a few minutes to read this before we continue. Let’s all have a drink in the meantime.”

His hands shook as he took the parchment from Pel, as did his legs when he rose to move to a more private space in the large room.

With a deep, heavy breath, he broke the seal on the letter and unrolled it.

Harry,

If you’re reading this, then both me and Quisby are dead and you aren’t of age yet. I’m not one for pretty words, so don’t get your hopes up. I hope I went out with my wand in my hand, but if I didn’t, I expect I don’t much care now. I’m real sorry that I’m gone, but not because of me. I got people waiting for me on the other side, people I’ll be glad to see. I’m sorry because I reckon you’ll take it hard, not to flatter myself. I wish I hadn’t left you, but you know as well as me that sometimes life will just shit on you.

At any rate, I’m leaving you everything I got, minus a few things that Pel’s going to make sure he gets to Hippia George, who’s an old friend.

Congratulations boy, you’re now the proud owner of the Hog’s Head.

Don’t fuck it up too much.

If you want to unload the place, go right ahead, I don’t mind. Just make sure of a few things. Make sure the buyers aren’t going to close it or turn it in to a bloody tearoom or the like. I’d like to think my place was important for folks who weren’t important. Make sure you take Ariana with you. I’ll
haunt you to the ends of time if you let anything happen to her, and she’d be lonesome without either of us. Take care of my goats. You don’t have to keep them – who knows where your path will take you. But make sure they’re taken care of before you go.

Now. We have to talk about your magic. You’re the owner of the Head as of July 31st, 1978, the day you become a legal adult. Before that, it’s held in trust by Pel. Problem is that squibs can’t own property in Diagon or Hogsmeade. This means you’re going to have to come out as a wizard by your birthday. Otherwise, the bastards at the Ministry will probably try to confiscate it.

You may hate me because of this, and I’m sorry if you do. I don’t want to force your hand, but I can’t bring myself to leave my home to just anyone. You’re my boy, Harry Aberforth, and that’s a fact. You deserve to have my home. And you deserve to stop hiding. Talk to Pel. Come up with some rot that the fools will swallow whole. And then live as the person you are. Anything less does a wrong to me, to your dad, and to your mum.

I should probably go on and tell you all sorts of nonsense, shit about what’s important, how to live. But I reckon you already know most of it. I expect sooner or later you’ll be setting your sights on Voldemort and his boys. That you’ll try to save Potter and Evans and the others. Do it, if you think it’s best. Just try to be smart about it.

Pel’s been asked to set up a meeting with you and others you know who I think will be able to help you. Tell them the truth about you being a wizard. Take their help or leave it, it’s up to you.

Never forget what Pel said about telling the whole truth. He had the right of it. I’m gone, but promise me that you won’t forget this. I don’t want to even think about what’ll happen to you if it gets out. Hell, I’ll even say ‘please,’ and you know damn well that isn’t a word that crosses these old lips often.

I trust you and I’m proud of you. Never thought I’d have a son, and I’d never want another.

And now I’ve had enough of this ruddy sentimental crap, so I’ll just sign off.

Yours,

Aberforth Dumbledore.

Harry rolled the parchment up with clipped, precise movements.

I’m his boy …

I promise, Ab. I promise I won’t forget what Pel said.

He blinked.

I should be crying. Why am I not crying right now?

His eyes were, in fact, entirely dry, and his mind felt like a calmed sea. He was actually a bit concerned. I really should be freaking out, I think.

But Pel had noticed he had rolled the parchment up and was looking at him with kind, expectant eyes. One by one the others noticed the solicitor’s gaze on him, and they too turned to Harry.

He sighed as he stood and moved back to his seat by Hagrid.
“I expect you know what we’re here to talk about now, Harry,” Pel began. “You okay with that?”

_I trust Ab. And Ab trusted them._

_And I can trust them too._

The young man finally shrugged. “I’m not okay with anything that’s happened since … but yeah, let’s get on with it, I guess.”

“One more thing before we start. Hagrid,” Pel said, smiling at the half-giant as he pulled out a scrap of parchment, “Ab expected that you might come today. He asked me to read a short message he wrote to you in addition to the one you’ve already gotten. It says ‘Oaf: Thanks for taking care of Harry and getting him to talk with Pel and the others. I know that you got a bond of loyalty to my brother. I don’t agree with it, but I won’t fault you for it. Some things are going to be said that I don’t want him to know about yet. They just aren’t his business, they’re Harry’s. I don’t want to ask you to keep your silence or lie to my brother. So I’m asking you to go away for a bit. Harry will fill you in on what he wants you to know when he’s ready. Trust him. And thank you again for what you’re doing.’”

Hagrid looked truly hurt, but nodded mutely. “All righ’ then, I reckon.” He mumbled. “I’ll go an’ find myself a nice pint downstairs.”

Harry grabbed his arm as he stood. “I will tell you Hagrid. It’s just … complicated right now.”

The half-giant gave a grimace that he tried to morph into a smile. “I know, ‘Arry. And Ab’s right – I can’t keep a secret ter save my life. Better this way, I’m thinkin’.”

As the door closed behind Hagrid, Pel turned back to those left in the room. “Might go faster if you just showed them, Harry.”

He closed his eyes and twisted his wrist under the table so that his wand landed in his palm.

The spell was on his lips, but sudden doubt flooded through him and he shuddered involuntarily.

_Can I even cast the spell? Will I ever be able to cast it again?_

_I’ve never been so happy as I was._

Memories of Ab and the Head flitted through his head. Christmas. Getting his OWL results. Dueling together in the forest, lazy afternoons studying Potions in the kitchen.

The words from Ab’s letter echoed in his mind as if the old man himself were speaking them.

_You’re my boy, Harry Aberforth, and that’s a fact._

_Never thought I’d have a son, and I’d never want another._

Harry opened his eyes and raised his wand.

_“Expecto Patronum.”_”

A silvery albatross burst forth and circled the room with a single wingbeat before alighting on his shoulder and slowly dissipating.

Myrtle was smirking.
Wigol barely seemed to notice.

Caffrey Burke looked at him with blue eyes that glittered with interest.

Doc, Guin, and Dalcop were thoroughly stunned.

“Well,” Pel awkwardly broke the sudden silence, “as you can see, Harry’s definitely not a squib.”

“I love a man of mystery,” Burke purred with a grin. “Do tell me more, green eyes.”

Harry sighed. “Oh, for fuck’s sake …”

They weren’t listening to him, Harry grumbled to himself for the third time as Dalcop, Doc, and Guin continued to assault him with questions.

“Mate, I just don’t understand why you’d pretend –”

“You should have been in school all these years, not –”

“Merlin, lad, why didn’tcha tell ‘em when they hauled ya in for killin’ Macnair?”

Without planning it, he suddenly pounded his fist on the table. “Stop! Now! Please shut up and listen to me, dammit!”

“How adorable,” he caught Myrtle dryly mumbling to the Captain. Harry glared at them, but they both stared back, unrepentant.

The other three had finally stopped their barrage of questions, however, so he turned back to them. “Look, I get that you have questions. We’re friends. You deserve answers to them. And you’ll get them,” whenever Pel and me come up with a good lie, that is, “but not today. I’m … look, I wasn’t just pretending to be a squib because it was bloody fun, you know. I don’t want to talk about the, er, past, please.”

The faces in the room ranged from confused to sad to curious. Well, Myrtle was still smirking, but he decided not to count her.

“The only reason Ab and Pel even found out is because Pel saw me use magic when Macnair captured me. Otherwise, I would never have told them. So, well, now you know I’m a wizard. I’ll have to come out as one by my birthday anyway –”

“Why?” Guin asked.

“Ab left him the pub, Guin,” Pel took over. “Squibs can’t own property in Hogsmeade, so it’s either admit to being a wizard or let the Ministry take the Head.”

Doc frowned. “If it was so dangerous for people to know that you’d risk the Kiss, why come out now over a pub?”

Pel and Harry glanced at each other. “The situation Harry was in has … changed significantly since last year,” the barrister explained carefully. “It’s true there is some danger, but much of it is gone, an’ the boy doesn’t deserve to have to hide for the rest of his life.”

Captain Burke had been looking around the room for the last several minutes. “Seems to me that this secret wasn’t just known to you and Ab, Pepst.”
Wigol Palter shrugged and said nothing.

“I caught the boys practicing magic in the Forest last fall. For what it’s worth, Harry is more than just a decent wizard. Boy can fight well enough,” Myrtle admitted with a nonchalant wave of her hand.

“Yes, yes, the boy’s talented, can we please move on?” Pel groused. “Now, Ab had a few requests for some of you. Doc an’ Guin, you two first. Ab hoped that you would consider taking over the Head just until Harry’s birthday. I know it’s a big favor, but you were such a great help when he was poisoned that –”

“No.” Harry was surprised by his own voice. But the idea that had just popped into his head felt so right. “No, I don’t need help just until my birthday. I have … things I have to do. Things that’ll take me away from the Head sometimes, I think. Ab said he didn’t care if I sold the pub once it’s mine, but I don’t want to sell it. It’s, well, it’s home. But I can’t do a good job by it either by myself. You guys are great at the Head, and I think Ab would approve.” He paused, suddenly very nervous. “What do you … what do you think about figuring out a way for you to become co-owners? I mean, it’s totally fine if you aren’t interested but –”

“I’d actually really like that, I think,” Guin interrupted, a surprised grin growing on her face. “What do you think, Doc?”

The one-armed man was staring at Harry, his typical smile replaced by a considering frown. “I’d be interested in thinking about it, Harry. We found out not long ago that they aren’t going to be able to fit me with any sort of useful prosthetic. The curse damage, you see … And Voldemort’s supporters are slowly getting more and more influence in the Ministry. Between my known association with people who work against him and my injury, we’ve been expecting that they’ll sack me soon.” He absently rubbed the stub of his arm. “But we’d have to talk about the particulars. For now, if you can pay us for our time, we’ll certainly help at the Head until your birthday, at least.”

Pel cut in. “Harry, as your ‘family’s’ solicitor, I have to warn you against just giving away part ownership of a business, no matter how –”

“I won’t give it away, Pel,” Harry assured him. “I don’t really know how this works, but can’t Guin and Doc, I don’t know, buy out some of my ownership or something? I don’t want to give them half –” he sent an apologetic look their way, “Ab left it to me and I want to make sure it’s taken care of, but maybe they can buy, er, a good chunk of the remaining percentage of it or something.”

Pel nodded. “It’s not a bad idea, if they agree. For now, since they’ve agreed to help until your birthday, we can wait a bit. You can’t do anything official until then anyway.”

“Thank you for thinking of us, Harry,” Guin murmured. “This could be really fun! Who would ever have thought I’d be an owner of the Hog’s Head?”

“Well, that’s settled enough for now. Good to know we lowlifes will still have a place to go!” Pel said. “Dalcop, you’re next. Ab didn’t ask much of you, except to start telling Harry when you overhear important information at the Ministry, just like you used to do for him.”

“Course I’ll tell the lad!”

Myrtle was watching the goings-on with bright eyes. “And what does the illustrious Aberforth want me to do?”

Pel frowned. “Well, first, Dalcop, you might want to go an’ get yourself a drink downstairs. Things to discuss that you’re just as well not having to know about.”
Dalcop eyed Myrtle and Burke with uncharacteristic shrewdness. “Aye, I think you may be right ‘bout that, Pel. Cheers, Harry,” he added softly, briefly gripping the young man’s shoulder. “You just let me know if you need anythin’.”

Harry nodded, not having to force the small smile on his face. “Thanks Dalcop. I’ll see you later.”

As the door closed behind the old barfly, Pel turned back to the group. “All right, Cramer, I’m not sure I agree with this.” He sighed. “But this ain’t about me, is it? Ab knew that Harry would want to get himself involved with the resistance to the war. He asked that you consider him a possible replacement for himself, and that you keep an eye on him.”

“Done.” Everyone blinked in surprise at her immediate agreement. “What? I’ve seen him fight. He’s not an idiot. Easy choice. Plus, he has access to liquor. Best type of ally to have, I say.” She grinned at him. “Besides, he’s the one that came up with the original idea for the tracking bullets.”

All eyes turned to Harry.

_Holy shit, she actually gave me credit._

“This just gets better and better!” Burke sat forward and rubbed his hands in excitement, his eyes alight. “Well, I know why I’m here, and yes, Ab will be grateful to know that I’m thrilled to relieve young Harry the wizard of his pesky virginity.”

Harry flicked his wand and sent a tankard into the side of the Captain’s head that soaked his hair in beer, while Pel charmed the man’s armchair to bite his arse.

“Merlin, _not_ the appropriate time, Captain,” Doc said with a glare and a pointed look towards Harry.

Burke affected repentance and rubbed his backside.

“Oh shut it, Burke. Ab says that he knows Harry’s going to want to fight, an’ while he’s good, he needs to, quote, ‘learn how to fight better and think like a sneaky bastard.’ Ab wants you to help him with that, if Harry decides to pursue your instruction.”

“Well, I _am_ once of the best fighters in Britain.”

“How do you even judge something like that?” Guin asked with feigned innocence.

Burke gave her a smile that would make Gilderoy Lockhart envious. “It’s universally agreed upon, love.”

Everyone in the room but Burke snorted.

“Much as I hate to say it, the Captain does have a reputation for his prowess and his grasp of tactics,” Pel admitted.

Harry slowly stopped listening to the banter of the others, especially when Guin and Doc clamored to hear the real story of what happened at Macnair’s, which Pel agreed to tell.

_It’s nice, it’s good, that I have these people. And Poppy and Hagrid. I can fight with Myrtle, I guess. Work the Head with Doc and Guin. But it isn’t as good as Ab. Not nearly as good._

_I like these people, I care about them._

_But they aren’t family, except for Pel. Not like Ab is._
He closed his eyes and imagined what it would be like to go back to the Head. *I can’t live in one room with Hagrid forever, after all, and soon enough I’ll own the place. I can’t avoid it.* The thought was a little exciting – Harry Potter, pub owner! – but right now it was more terrifying. *Ab died there. Can I go back there?*

*Can it really be home again?*

As the conversation droned on, he wrestled with his feelings. He wanted to go back, was scared to go back, and perhaps more than anything else, he wanted to be able to breathe freely without feeling that horrible emptiness in his chest.

*Maybe … maybe I just need to get away for a little while. Farther away from the Head than just Hagrid’s place. I’ve never really been anywhere other than a few places in Britain and Belgium for tests. Maybe I need to go, so that I can come back right …*

The more he rolled the idea around in his head, the better it felt.

He realized with a start that the others were looking at him. Apparently Pel had finished his story and they were ready to leave.

“Um, before we go, I was wondering about one more thing. If it would be okay, I mean, with the Captain and with the Doc and Guin.” He took a deep breath.

*I must be out of my mind."

“Captain Burke? That offer from earlier this year still good?”

Caffrey looked at him with an eyebrow cocked. The confusion on his face slowly drained into a satisfied smile. “Oh, you’d better believe it, kid.”

The walk back to Hagrid’s hut was at once comforting and terribly uncomfortable. It felt as good as always to travel down familiar paths with the man he considered his first true friend, but Harry’s mind was whirring with ways to tell the half-giant his plan without hurting his feelings.

As they settled down for a simple dinner together that night, Harry sighed and folded his hands in his lap.

“Ye can tell me straight out, ‘Arry,” Hagrid said quietly. “Don’ rightly know what’s on yer mind, but ye’ve got ter work on yer poker face.”

The younger man gave an uncomfortable chuckle. “Okay, Hagrid. It’s, see … I … I actually love that you’re my godfather. It means a lot to me that Ab thought to do it, and that you accepted. But … even staying at your place, all I see when I go out is, I don’t know, ghosts, I guess. The past. And it just won’t stop hitting me in the gut.”

Hagrid eyed him knowingly. “Aye, I know that feelin’. Felt the same after my da’ died. That hurt don’t ever go away, but it does get better, lad.”

Harry nodded. “It’s just … I know where my home is. I really do. But right now, right now I feel like I’m suffocating. So, I want to tell you that I’ve decided to go away for a little while. Not for too long, I’ll be back by my birthday –” Harry rushed on, “I have to be anyway for Ab’s will reading.
And I think I’ve got something set up, I just … I just don’t want to hurt your feelings or make you think I don’t like being here. It’s just not right for right now.”

“So where’re ya thinkin’ a’ goin’?”

Hagrid spoke in an entirely neutral voice. Harry had not idea how to interpret the man’s feelings, so he just pressed on. “Caffrey Burke offered me a short-term job on his ship. They’re going to a bunch of places way south of here.”

Indeed, the places Burke mentioned as possible destinations all felt warm and colorful and new. Different. Places with names that tasted like some exotic spice on his tongue. Havana, Bogotá, Montevideo. “I’ve accepted the offer, and made sure that the Dearborns can take care of the pub. I, well, I leave in two days. Maybe going away will help me come back, you know, better. At least I hope so ... So, what do you think?”

The half giant regarded him with a resigned smile. “I think ye did the right thing, not askin’ my permission –” he raised a hand when Harry opened his mouth, “nah, even though I’m yer godfather now, ye didn’t do it. I’da said no, I reckon. Don’t wan’ ye getting’ hurt an’ all. But … but ye ain’t a little ‘un who needs someone ta tell ye what to do. Guess yer a man already, though I didn’t really notice when that happened. I doubt anyone’ll care if you go, bein’ a squib an’ all …” Hagrid sighed and licked his lips. “At any rate, yer a man now. Ya don’t need my permission … But ya got my blessin’. I’ll be here fer ya when ye need me, tha’s true enough. Just remember it, all right?”

The tears that hadn’t come when Harry had read Aberforth’s final letter to him earlier that day pricked threateningly at his eyes as he choked out a response. “I will, Hagrid. I really will. We’re … we’re family, after all, aren’t we?

For the rest of the evening the two passed the time in comfortable conversation, ending with Hagrid’s drunken toast to Harry’s future as the newest British wizarding pirate.

23 May, 1978

Harry paced nervously around the hippogriff paddock after Hagrid left to tend to some of his beasties in the Forest. It had been all well and good to arrange for a position on The Bachelor’s Delight but, as Pel had reminded him, Harry was still on parole until his seventeenth birthday. Technically, he couldn’t leave the country without clearing it with his Auror overseer.

He hadn’t seen Alice since that day, though the Prophet reported that she’d been released from St. Mungo’s not too long after Aberforth’s funeral. Harry had been so immersed in his own grief that he hadn’t realized until the day before that the silence on the young Auror’s part was … strange. She’d responded promptly to the owl he had sent her early this morning requesting a meeting as soon as possible, but her brief reply – I will meet you at lunchtime – didn’t do much to shed light on her current mindset.

When he saw a figure with blonde hair and scarlet robes approaching, he dipped inside to make sure that the tea tray was ready and came out just as Alice neared the hut.

After perfunctory greetings, they were soon seated in Hagrid’s massive armchairs.

“So, er, how are you healing up?” Harry began.

“All cleared for duty now, Harry. And thanks for coming after me… I’m sorry I didn’t come to thank
you earlier. And I’m really sorry about your friends.”

Alice was speaking sincerely enough, but Harry’s niggling suspicion that something was wrong only increased.

“Thanks for that, Alice. And, well, you’re welcome I guess, but there’s really no need to thank me.”

“So why am I here?” The question was brusque and entirely professional.

*Something is definitely wrong here.*

“Well, you see, I got a job offer. It’s just a temporary thing, but honestly … honestly I can’t bear to stay around here when everything makes me think of Ab. It’s on a transport ship, and I’d be gone until just before my birthday at the end of July. I … I really want to go. But I need you to sign off on it.”

Alice just nodded absently.

Harry’s alarm rose even more. *She is not acting like Alice. Not at all. Is she Polyjuiced? Is she Imperiused?*

“So, um, is that a yes then?”

He suddenly realized that Alice was playing with her wand as she looked away from him and into the distance. *Why is her wand out? It took everything he had not to draw his own. What the fuck is going on here?* His heart was beating too fast and his instincts screamed to prepare for battle.

Alice hummed noncommittally. “Well, maybe. I guess it depends on a few things.”

“Oh. Okay. Like what?”

The young Auror finally looked at him, her blue eyes hard and dull. “Like, for example, whether or not you think I should let a killer and a liar set sail on the high seas.”

His whole body felt cold, his heartbeat now like an icepick battering at his throat. The image of his mother saying something similar to him a year before thrust itself unwanted into his mind before he batted it away.

“I don’t … Alice? What, what do you mean?”

She sat rigidly in her chair as she stared him down. “Funny thing. The ropes Cross had me in at the graveyard were tied so tightly that I remember thinking they were going to cut off my circulation. Later, when I woke up and you were there, they were so loose that I could wriggle out of them. Funny, huh?”

Harry couldn’t breathe to respond. Alice looked away.

“I’m not exactly sure what happened for a time there, you know. So maybe Cross’ *Incarcerous* wore off somehow. Maybe. It’s a nice explanation, I think.”

*Her voice is all wrong. This … This could be really bad.*

“But there’s a few problems with that explanation, aren’t there Harry? You remember how I told you that my spare wand would notify Frank, right? How Frank showed up with the other Aurors?” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “Now most of them couldn’t have given two fucks about you, you know that. But not my Frank. No, he’s a good man. While you were out of it, he’s the one that
started healing you enough to transport you away. He’s no great Healer, of course, but he does well
enough in a pinch.

“Later, when I woke up at St. Mungo’s, Frank told me something. He probably should have reported
it, but, he didn’t. Yet. Because he knows I like you. Seems my fiancé found a wand strapped to your
arm. A wand in a holster he couldn’t remove.”

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

“And so we got to wondering what a squib would need a protected, holstered wand for. Seemed a
mite odd, wouldn’t you say, Harry?”

Her voice was limp and dead, and Harry shuddered.

“And then I got another funny feeling, so I checked it out. Did you know that Balthazar Cross died
from massive internal bleeding?”

Harry found his voice. “Well, you did sort of explode his torso, Alice.”

Her smile was sharp as a dagger. “Yeah. But I slipped into the morgue just to check it out. Figured
the DMLE examiners wouldn’t have bothered, given my report. Did you know that there was
another spell cast on him after my Confringo? Repleo, the refilling charm, was a strange one to find
on a body. A strange – but rather brilliant – way to kill someone. Especially someone already
injured. And it would only take a moment to cast.”

fuck fuck fuck.

“Tell me, Harry, if Frank had managed to get your wand – the wand I bet you have strapped to your
arm right now – and take a look at the last spells you had cast, would he have found Repleo?”

It was going to come out anyway. Well, not the Crouch stuff, but …

He closed his eyes.

“It’s possible.”

He thought she would listen to him, give him a chance to explain. But as soon as the words left his
mouth she trained her wand on him and adopted the ‘Auror’ voice. “Mr. Harry, you will accompany
me to the Ministry for questioning about –”

Fuck this.

As soon as she started Harry had flicked his wrist and palmed his wand. Alice was so intent on
glaring at his face that she didn’t even look at his hands.

“Expelliarmus, Haesio!” He snapped off the disarming spell and a sticking charm that kept all four
oh her limbs flush against the chair. She wasn’t going to draw her spare this time. He deftly caught
her primary wand as it hurled towards him.

“Merlin, Alice! What the hell are you doing?”

“What an Auror’s supposed to do with a killer and a liar, Harry,” the woman growled as she
struggled against the sticking charm. “It’s my job.”
"I can’t fucking believe you, Alice. I save your arse and you don’t even give me a bloody chance to explain? Really?!"

Her glare would have put Snape’s to shame. “Fine, then, Harry, explain.”

He ran a nervous hand through his hair and sat down, his disappointment in Alice warring with his incredulity. His other hand kept his wand trained on the Auror.

“Christ, Alice,” he muttered. “What do you want to hear about first?”

“Why you murdered Cross.”

“Oh screw this, Alice,” he bit out in disgust, thinking very fast. Ab’s voice was in his head urging him not to say anythin’ stupid that they could pin on you, lad. “Fine. Let’s say, hypothetically, that I did cast a refilling charm on Cross. You’re right, it’s a strange curse to use, especially on a guy whose intestines were beginning to decorate the ground. Maybe an untrained wizard might cast that in the absence of blood replenishing potion to keep the injured man alive. After all, it isn’t illegal to cast Repleo on someone.”

God, what a load of bullshit.

Alice seemed to have the same thought. “Yeah, right. Or maybe said wizard just wanted to kill him quietly in revenge for the man killing his friends.”

Harry nodded. “Maybe. But maybe a person could say that a man who’d just killed four innocent people in cold blood, stunned an old woman, and kidnapped and tortured an Auror and a teenager deserved it. That such a person could never be reformed. And that the untrained wizard who’d killed him couldn’t be sure that he wouldn’t attack him and the Auror – both really injured – again before help arrived.”

“You killed him,” Alice hissed.

He wanted to punch a wall. “Maybe. Prove it, Alice. And even if you can, do you think the wizarding world would want to convict a person who killed the man who killed and hurt so many upstanding citizens? People like Goyle? Are you going to be Cross’ great defender now?”

I hate having to talk like this. I hate it. It’s like that meeting with Barty Crouch Sr. all over again.

Alice stared at him for several moments. “That was low, Harry. Really low. And yeah, they would convict him if that person were a squib.”

He couldn’t stop himself from laughing. “Believe me, I know that.”

“But you aren’t a squib, are you?” The accusation lay heavily her voice.

I wasn’t going to get out of this.

“No, Alice. No I’m not.”

“Why the hell would you lie about that sort of thing, Harry? What the fuck is wrong with you, just going around lying and killing and –”

“Fuck you, Alice,” he said in a soft voice laced with fury. “We were supposed to be friends. Fuck you, if that’s what you think I do.”
Her head fell back in the chair as if he’d punched her.

“You think,” Harry hissed, “that I would let myself rot in the STIFF, that I would go on trial, that I would opt for the fucking Dementor’s Kiss, if I had a fucking choice? While you’re sitting there, judging me, think about that fact that I lied about being a squib for a bloody reason. And that I felt that the Kiss was a better option than what would happen to me if I told the truth.”

She stared at him in shock.

“You fucking think about that, before you judge me a worthless little liar, Alice Fawley.”

He sat back in his chair, desperately wanting to put his head in hands and close his eyes, but unwilling to drop his guard against Alice. The sticking charm would wear off at some point. Probably not for a while, but still.

The Auror was silent for a few minutes as she chewed over what Harry had said. Finally, she spoke up, her tone now hurt rather than accusing. “You could have told me – should have told me, Harry. But you lied. I’m your friend, and you lied to me every day.”

And that was it.

Fury, hot and writhing, rose in Harry like bile. He really thought, he supposed, that he was over this particular hurt, but apparently the wound had festered within him. “Friend?! You sit there and claim to be my fucking friend? God, if that’s so, I don’t need enemies!”

There was nothing on Alice’s face but confusion.

“Nothing even pops to mind, does it Alice? You’re just the very model of moral perfection, aren’t you?” He felt near tears. “I’ve always liked you, you know that, right? But I’ve known for nearly a year that you aren’t my friend. You aren’t my friend at all. Not in any way that matters.”

“Harry, what are you talk –”

“Oh no!” he cried in a high-pitched, mocking voice. “The little squib boy overheard us talking about our super secret club for fighting Voldemort! Whatever shall we do?” Alice’s eyes grew wide. “I know! We must Obliviate the dear boy, even though it could scramble the poor lad’s brain!” Harry was fleetingly a bit proud of his Dumbledore impersonation. “Great idea, sir! Who cares if it’s incredibly illegal? Needs must, after all!”

Alice looked like prey cornered by a predator. “You – it didn’t take, did it?”

“Something like that,” Harry spat.

“But Harry, you don’t understand it was import –”

“Good to see your morality is hardly set in stone, Alice. Sure, Harry’s bad because he may have killed the guy that was trying to kill us, but it’s totally okay to risk destroying his mind, because keeping our secrets is so much more important.” His skin felt hot and he desperately wanted to blow something up. “I always liked you, Alice, but I knew then that you weren’t any kind of friend of mine. And definitely not the sort of person I wanted to be real friends with. Same with Black, Potter, Dumbledore, your fiancé, and Moody. You lot fancy yourselves heroes. All I see are hypocrites.

He was breathing too fast, still shocked that such anger at them had been lurking for so long inside him.
“God, you all can be so … so … so bloody disappointing.”

“I – I’m …” Alice shook her head, apparently unsure of exactly what she was. “The next time I saw you, you acted like you didn’t know who I was.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah. Total act. Did it because I was pissed, I guess. And I also wanted to see if you’d do the decent thing and take me to St. Mungo’s or somewhere because there was obviously something wrong with me.”

“I failed that test.”

“Completely.”

They sat in silence again. Harry’s feet were itching. I can’t wait to get out of here. Out of Britain. I’m so tired of all of this.

Finally, judging that Alice wasn’t going to initiate any more discussion, Harry looked at her with exhausted eyes drained of their fury. “Look, we have figure out what we’re going to do. You came here expecting to arrest me. I can’t trust that you won’t do that even if you say you won’t.”

Alice opened her mouth to say something and then closed it.

“So. You can arrest me. But you can’t prove I killed Cross with any sort of … what’s the legal phrase? … Malicious intent, right? The spell I allegedly would have used isn’t technically illegal to use on humans. You can’t get me for practicing magic without an education, since I have my OWLs (Alice’s eyes got wide at that), though you could get me for practicing underage magic, I guess. It’s my first offense, so I guess I’d get a warning letter.”

I don’t want to have to say this. But I will.

“It’s also not illegal to claim to be a squib, even in court. Believe me, my solicitor and I checked that a dozen times. So yeah, you could try to make a big deal out of this. Fine. But know, Alice, that if you do, I made sure to keep proof that you and two other Aurors took part in the illegal Obliviation of a minor by the headmaster of Hogwarts and current Chief Warlock …”

I hate this. Goddammit, I hate this.

Deep breath.

Make it believable.

“I have that evidence, Alice. And I will fucking bury you with it. Dumbledore would probably be fine, and Moody, given his record. But two young Aurors like you and Longbottom? Well, you know as well as me how much the wizarding world likes sacrifices.”

Alice was very still and very pale.

Guilt bit sharply at Harry, though that was mostly drowned out by his pride for delivering the bluff so well. True, he could probably get Poppy Pomfrey to help, since she did witness everything, but Harry hardly had incontrovertible proof.

“You’d really do that, wouldn’t you?”

“If you try to take me in? Yeah. I would. Otherwise I’ll just let it go. We aren’t friends, Auror Fawley, but I don’t really want to be your enemy either. All I really want is for you sign off on my
new job and to let me go.” The strong voice he’d been using cracked. “Dammit, Alice, please, I just really need to get out of here.”

“Okay.”

Harry blinked. “Okay?”

Alice rolled her eyes but still avoided looking at him. “Yeah, as in, ‘okay, I’ll sign off on it.’ I don’t … I don’t want to arrest you, even without, you know, what you just said.”

“Oh. Thanks, then.” Harry was starting to get a headache, and it felt weird to say anything more to her after blowing up and threatening her like he had. “Um, like I said, I have to be back for my birthday, so I can sign parole papers if I need to then. Have to be here for the will, after all. Ab left me the Head, so I have to come out as a wizard soon enough anyway.” He gave her a penetrating look, then shrugged. “Look, I expect you’ll run off as soon as you leave here and tell people about this. I wish you wouldn’t, it’ll probably make things more complicated for me, but I know I can’t stop you. I understand where your loyalties lie.”

Alice’s eyes suddenly blazed and Harry shrank back in surprise. “Oh shut the fuck up, Harry,” she growled. “Yeah, I feel bad about the Obliviation, but don’t you dare …” She breathed hard and struggled for words. “You stand here all hurt and self-righteous about how you were wronged. Have you ever stopped, for even a bloody minute, and realized that you haven’t given us one damn good reason to trust you? You pop up out of nowhere, don’t even tell people your real name, and then have the audacity to make yourself a poor little victim of people not trusting you with absolutely nothing to go on? Merlin, Harry do you even hear yourself? You’ve lied to me every day, you’ve even let me think I killed someone, and you think you’re a good friend?”

She’s never killed anyone before, he realized absently, even as everything else she said lanced into him.

The young Auror broke off and closed her eyes. After a moment, she looked at him again with an expression full of neither loathing nor indignation, but something closer to pity.

“Lying all the time, pretending to be something you’re not … that’s going to catch up with, Harry. You just can’t go through your life expecting so much more from people than you’re willing to give them.” She sighed. “I’m not proud of the Obliviation, but I stand by it. We can’t trust you, because we don’t know you. And dammit all, Harry, but that’s on you.”

He wanted to protest, but shock had stolen his voice.

“And now, look at you,” Alice continued, her expression bitter and sad. “Even now you want me not to tell anyone that you’re a wizard. Honestly, Harry? I don’t need friends who manipulate me into making myself a liar.”

Harry licked his lips, indignant but floundering to find a defense that he could actually give her. In the end he surrendered, sighed, and released her from the sticking charms. His wand he kept out as he handed hers back. “Whatever Alice … Look, are we done here?”

Alice stared at her wand. “Yeah, Harry, we’re done …” The moment dragged on, the tension in the room thick. “But really, thanks for saving me in the graveyard.”

Harry shuffled awkwardly. It doesn’t matter how angry you are. You should say it. “Tell Frank thanks for keeping mum to the others about my wand. And thank you for that too, if you do, I mean. It’s appreciated.”
Another deeply uncomfortable pause stretched between them as Alice moved to the door.

“Goodbye, Harry.”

“Yeah. Bye, Alice.

The door whispered closed behind her.

xoxoxox

This concludes Arc II.

xoxoxox

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is inspired by a line in The Byrds’ song "Turn, Turn, Turn" (©1965, whose lyrics are themselves adapted from Eccl. 3:1-8), “a time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together.”

(*) On Goats Riding Hippogriffs
Goats riding horses is a thing. I did not know it was a thing until I started researching goat behavior for this story. Google video search “goats riding horses.” The results are delightful.

This ends Arc II

Finally, a huge thanks to everyone who has subscribed, bookmarked, recommended and/or commented on this story!
Swashbucklin'

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long introductory note, but some warnings may be in order:

There will be brief, (barely explicit) het sex in this chapter (and only this chapter of the entire story).

Please keep in mind that I am very, very gay. Thus I shall be clumsily fumbling my way through the mysteries of heterosexual intercourse here. I have absolutely no doubt that breasts and vaginas are lovely, wonderful things, but I have no clue at all what exactly to, er, do with them.

There are also two extremely short slash-y (no actual sex) scenes that exist for plot only. Nonetheless, as Harry isn’t quite of age yet, I have added the “Underage” tag to this story.

There will be a smattering of Spanish and Portuguese, most of it regional slang from Cuba, Uruguay, and Brazil, and most of it very bad words. I opted not to translate as none of it is really necessary for one to understand the scene. Harry’s use of the languages is intentionally incorrect at points.

Finally, please note the dates. The chapter begins at the end of July and then switches back to Harry’s first day on the ship, from where it will proceed chronologically.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XXIII. Swashbucklin’

23 July, 1978

Harry ducked as another man jumped over the ramparts onto the Delight, wildly casting a rainbow of curses. As he threw up a shield and rolled across the decks he had just enough time to hear the man yell at him – “¡Vete al infierno!” – before the flaming javelin of a high-powered Incendio Telum barreled towards him.

He snapped his wand and sent an Auster Maximus at the blaze, which blew the flames back towards the caster. “¡No me jodas, pinche!” Harry cried back with a grin as the man scrambled away.

“Dammit, kid, we’ve been through this!” Caff bellowed from his position defending the foremast. “Fire on ships is bad! No fire! It’s –” The Captain was cut off when another two men jumped onto the ship and started at him.

“Sorry, Cap’n, didn’t quite catch that,” Harry called back, his smile spreading wider, as he aimed a Flame Whip at another approaching man and sent him howling into the salt spray. “Couldn’t hear – Protego, Vespra Crabro! – you over the sound of you screwing Pombagiras’ great-grandkid and getting us into this mess! You– Stupefy! – said to use more fire? Aye-aye, sir!”
To his right Sticky Dag laughed and Red Nora rolled her eyes as they honed in on their own targets. “He’s gonna hang ya from the yardarm for that!” Dag shouted before petrifying one of the attackers and binding him with ropes.

“He’ll have to catch me—*Fulminis!*—first, Sticky!”

“Dammit,” Caff screamed. “No lightning either! *No lightning spells on my ship, Harry!*”

Poor Caffrey, they’ve all done too good a job teaching me. Harry chuckled to himself as he looked for his next fight. *Bloody hell, I’ll kind of miss being a pirate, I think.* “Oh! *Incendio Telum!*”

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**24 May, 1978**

As *The Bachelor’s Delight* slipped over the waves just beyond Bantry Bay and into the Atlantic Ocean, Harry closed his eyes from his perch against the bowsprit and let the wind course through his hair.

*This feels good. Like I’m flying, almost.*

The tang of salt and the whip of the waves assailed his senses, and for the first time he started to understand why his new patronus might be an albatross. *If they spend their whole lives like this, maybe the birds are onto something.*

It was also the first time all day Harry had felt any measure of comfort. He’d apparated to Whiddy Island, a lovely spit of land in a bay just off Ireland’s southwestern coast. While only a handful of muggles populated Whiddy, a small wizarding village that served as Great Britain’s hub for wizarding maritime business sat on its far western corner.

Well, not so much a village, he corrected himself. More a set of piers, three pubs, an unmanned Auror outpost, a potions supplier, a magical shipwright, and what Harry was fairly certain was the mildly disturbing combination of a brothel-cum-greengrocers.

Despite its remoteness and tiny size, Whiddy Wizarding Port was fairly bustling. Three ships were due to leave that day, so a motley crew of sailors were returning from visits to the mainland. Harry passed *The Siren’s Sister*, a rather small, scarlet-sailed carrack upon which a dark-haired woman in a large, feathered hat was issuing a string of orders in Portuguese. Next to it was *Coinchenn’s Revenge*, whose figureheads—a trio of mean-eyed buxom mermaids—called out insults to passerby and flashed their breasts to those brazen enough to insult them right back. Last in port was resplendent a galleon flying the Jolly Roger, whose majesty was only partially undermined by the blaring music of, if Harry wasn’t mistaken, David Bowie that streamed forth from it.

*That one has to be The Bachelor’s Delight,* Harry thought with a half smile, half grimace, as he watched a few rather rough-looking blokes doing … sailor-y things on the decks. *What the hell was I thinking?*

It would not be the last time he had that thought that day.

Once Captain Burke spied him and called down from his position on the poop deck, everything became a whirlwind. He was given a long tour of the ship—which was smaller but more elaborate than *The Elizabeth*—that culminated in being shown to his quarters. Despite the liberal use of expansion charms throughout the vessel, the room was miniscule, a near-replica of the quarters he’d had on Burke’s brother’s ship earlier that year. The principle difference, he noted with a wry smile,
was that his ceiling on *The Delight* featured wizarding photographs of nubile young women *and* men all vying for his appreciation.

Burke noticed him noticing, and gave him a suggestive once-over.

*Oh for fuck’s sake.*

“Caffrey, I’m in mourning. *Mourning,*” he said slowly, as if to a small child. “It’s not nice to leer at boys in mourning. I mean, you shouldn’t do it anyway in general because it’s, y’know, wrong, but doing it to a mourning kid is just tacky.”

The Captain reared back as if he’d been slapped. “Oh! Oh, hell, I’m so sorry, Harry,” he confessed with all sincerity. “I mean, honestly I’m thrilled with a good bit of inappropriateness at least once a day. Or twice, I suppose. But I never mean to cross the line into *tacky.*”

*That’s some masterful missing of the point, that is.*

“But I don’t mind being on a first name basis, actually,” *Good lord, that smile is back already,* “just call me Captain in front of the others, hmm? Have to maintain professional boundaries and all.”

*What the hell was I thinking?*

Later Harry wandered topside and the Captain began taking him around to meet the crew. Numbering a bit more than two dozen, the majority of his new crewmates didn’t seem all that interested in his existence. A giant squib of Samoan descent who went by the improbable ‘Chester’ (no crewmember on a wizarding pirate ship should be named ‘Chester,’ in Harry’s opinion) gave him a friendly grin that crinkled the thick tattoos on his face. The first mate, a chubby little man with twinkling eyes whom everyone called Sticky Dag attached himself to the Captain and Harry for the latter part of the tour. Harry didn’t ask the origins of the nickname, but enjoyed the man’s crass commentary about the ship.

Although Chester and Sticky Dag seemed decent enough, the whole tour felt awkward and weird to Harry, especially after Burke gave a wink and introduced him to the gathered crew as his own temporary apprentice. Most either scowled or rolled their eyes knowingly.

*What the hell have I gotten myself into? Merlin, they think I’m like Burke’s boy-toy or something!*

“Well!” the Captain said, clapping his hands. “Now that we all know each other, let’s get going, shall we? Sticky, check forward charms, Zee, the ones amidships, and Gareth, you’re on aft. The rest of you lot, have fun doing whatever. We’ll dive tomorrow for a bit, so I’ll have more charms assignments then, but let’s give the new boy a treat and take her out on the surface today.”

Sticky Dag, a hard-looking woman in her sixties, and one of two very attractive young men who had been glaring daggers at him got to work going over the charms that Harry guessed kept the ship watertight and helped adjust the various sails. But he was rather shocked that the majority of the crew was left with nothing to do.

“Er, Captain Burke? Shouldn’t the rest of us be, I don’t know, working or –”

“Swabbing the decks, maybe?” The man burst out laughing. “Oh Harry, this isn’t a muggle ship. Charms do a lot of the work with the actual sailing, and we can clean the place magically, of course. Hell, I could probably sail *The Delight* well enough with just two or three other people.”

“Well then why –”
“Why do I have a larger crew? Couple reasons. It helps when we take over muggle ships or rob warehouses to have about this many to make things go smoothly. Also helps when we run into other pirates trying to catch the same prey.” He laughed again when he saw Harry raise an eyebrow. “Oh, you can bet there will be some fights, lovely, though they’re really just to make money and relieve stress, not life-or-death battles. Good fun.”

Harry frowned. “So what does everyone do the rest of the time if they don’t have to work much?”

“We-ell,” Caffrey rolled back on his heels, thinking. “We trade off cooking nights, so that’s some work. As for the rest of the time, well, Gareth up there is a novelist, so he writes quite a bit. Chester’s a painter. Bunch of the others are hoping to become mercenaries, so they spend most of the day training – watch out for the big lady, that’s Red Nora and she’ll take your cock off. Not sure what Sticky and Whitby – he’s the grumpy looking bloke – no, the other one, no the other one– get up to so much. Ardith, she’s the really old one down there, she’s researching, ah, *questionable* applications of various charms with her apprentice, the younger swarthy fellow at the bow. Not the sort of thing you want to do on the mainland where there are more laws. Um … Zee sleeps a lot … And Alonzo there,” he moved his gaze appreciatively towards one of the handsome young men who had looked like they wanted to feed Harry to sharks. “Alonzo … well, come to think of it, I don’t believe Alonzo knows how to do much of anything, to be honest.” Burke grinned. “But he is lovely, isn’t he?”

*What the hell was I thinking?*

“At any rate, the day to day is pretty simple. This gives you and I plenty of time to work on training you up to fight!”

And now, as Harry breathed in the sea and the wind, he felt like maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

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27 May, 1978

“Well, that’s a wonderfully flashy way to get yourself killed.”

“Huh?”

Caffrey sighed. “Harry. It’s a fascinating – quite arresting, really – use of magic. But it’s ridiculously stupid to use a spell like that in battle.”

Harry swallowed his childish urge to pout. He really hadn’t expected the Captain to react this way.

It was the first day of their training and Burke had surfaced the galleon, to his great relief. Diving was beyond incredible, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever get past the visceral panic that came with walking on an open deck deep under the ocean, with only a few charms between him and a very unpleasant death.

Though watching the fish swim above you is pretty brilliant, he had to admit.

After they were comfortably atop the waves again, the Captain had expanded the main deck and framed it with charms that would prevent the spells from travelling beyond the warded area. A small group of sailors had crowded about on the upper decks and in the crow’s nests, drinking in the afternoon sun and idly interested in the upcoming session.

Burke had summoned a charmed dueling dummy and asked Harry to show him his most powerful offensive spell.
With a grin, Harry had taken some moments to frame his belief and cast a resounding Panemseco at the dummy. As the perfectly sliced pieces of the dummy fell apart from each other and rolled across the deck, their little audience hummed and the young wizard had turned to his new trainer.

Caffrey Burke was not impressed.

“Do you see the pieces of the dummy?” Harry bit out. “How is this not useful?”

With a few muttered spells Burke recomposed the dummy and summoned three others to the deck. “Let me show you. I’m going to activate all four of these for battle in their easiest setting. Your goal is to hit one of them – just one – with your little bread-slicing curse and stay conscious. Do that, and I’ll be impressed.”

*Easy enough.* Harry readied himself and gave Burke the word to activate them. The moment battle began, he dodged out of the way of a stunner and turned to target the closest dummy.

*Shite.*

Before he could do much of anything, he was dodging another curse and snapping up a shield. Rolling into a crouch, he flicked away his shield and set his sights on a different dummy. *It’s just bread. It’s bread.* He almost had the visual he needed for his belief to work when he was suddenly laying flat on his back and looking up into the gleaming blue eyes of Caffrey Burke.

“What? What happened?”

Burke laughed. “You got nailed by a Stupefy and an Expelliarmus.” He helped Harry to his feet. “So, why is using a spell like this a foolish idea in battle?”

Harry frowned. The problem was obvious, and he was annoyed he’d never thought of it. “Because working up the belief I need takes time and concentration. And I probably won’t have as much as I need of either in a battle, especially against more than one person.”

“Exactly. It’s impressive, but stupid in this context. That doesn’t mean your ideas don’t have real value, per se, but always think carefully about the realities of their applications. Though,” he wondered, “that one might be very useful against other ships. You could take a mast down nice with that, and the falling pieces would cause a ton of damage to a ship … Keep it in mind, okay?”

Harry bit his lip. He didn’t want to ask but … “Captain, why do you think that, uh, that Ab didn’t tell me about the problem with the spell? He’s been in tons of duels …”

Caffrey put his arm around the teenagers shoulders in, surprisingly, a completely platonic way. “I’m sure Aberforth thought of it, but he was probably more interested in encouraging you, and likely thought you’d eventually find the problem yourself. Anyway, let’s do some more magic.”

Appreciating the movement away from talking about Ab, Harry nodded.

“How about you show me … how you would kill someone quietly and without drawing attention to yourself. Use the dummy.”

Harry watched the dummy speculatively for a few minutes before whispering a spell and moving his wand surreptitiously at his side.

Nothing happened.

Caffrey frowned.
The sailors jeered.

“Done. He’s dead, or would be dead soon.”

The Captain’s frown deepened.

“Well, it won’t react because it doesn’t have human physiology, but if it were real, he’d be dead,” Harry repeated.

“What did ya do, Harry?” Sticky Dug called down from an upper deck.

The teenager’s smile felt tight and foreign on his face. “Don’t think about Crouch. Refilling charm on its heart. I filled it with so much blood – or in this case, stuffing – that, if he were human, it would have clogged his arteries and looked like a heart attack unless someone really investigated.”

Sudden silence stretched through the small crowd of sailors. “Nice, dearie,” the old woman named Ardith approved.

“Hell, very nice, very sneaky there.” Caffrey licked his lips. “Any others like that?”

Harry sat back for a moment, wishing he’d brought Tweeny Twig’s Guide for Young Domestics with him. Well, there’s that carbonation charm … “Yeah, maybe? Though it won’t work on the dummy either, and I’ve never tested this one on something living. What if I cast a localized carbonation spell on a person so that it made a few air bubbles in the veins of his leg? Those bubbles could go to a person’s heart or brain and kill them pretty easy and quiet, I think. And no one would ever check for an innocuous thing like a carbonation spell. It’d be incredibly hard to target but, as long as the person stayed relatively still for a few seconds, I think it’s doable.”

“Nice, mate!” Chester the giant tattooed squib bellowed from the crow’s nest before going back to his watercolor seascape.

“I find myself in agreement with you, Ches,” Burke murmured, his eyes locked on Harry. “You can just be a vicious little thing, can’t you?”

The boy shrugged and scowled. He wouldn’t call himself vicious, really. Or little. He’d had a huge growth spurt this spring, after all and was only an inch or two shorter than the Captain.

“Oh, sneaky fun aside, let’s do some dueling and see how quickly I can get you on your back, love!”

Harry rolled his eyes but leapt into action. It felt good to be moving, casting, thinking fast in the crisp sea wind as The Delight cleaved the waves. The more he fought, the less he had to dwell on what waited – and who didn’t wait – for him at home.

30 May, 1978

“Okay, mateys, transport’s sighted! Let’s make ready to pillage and plunder!” Captain Burke grinned at his crew as they assembled on decks under the light of a full moon. “Chester’s intercepted its communications. We’re looking at a Brazilian freighter loaded mainly with foodstuffs the British muggles are importing. We’ll ignore the fruits and veg – we got plenty of them on the last voyage – and focus on the grains and meats.”

Harry listened carefully from his position between Ardith the crazy charms researcher and Sticky
Dag. I can’t believe I’m going to rob some Brazilian transport boat and steal wheat or whatever of all things.

“Now for you assignments. This should be a simple stealth one, so most of you can sit it out. I want Sticky, Zee, Gareth, Nora, Blitzer, and Harry with me on the primary team. Alonzo, Ardith, Whitby, Dulce, Vizzini, and Inigo, you six are on reception. Ches, you monitor communications. Cenzo and Gigi, you two standby in case we need Obliviations. The rest of you mercenary wanna-bes, you decide among yourselves which six of you will be on standby if things go pear-shaped. Everyone else – enjoy the night off, and save us some drinks!”

As the teams began to split up, Harry turned to Sticky Dag. “What does all of that actually mean?” he asked quietly.

“Primary team – that’s us – are the ones who board the ship. For muggle transports, we try not ta get noticed. Once we sneak into the holds, we find the target stuff and start shrinkin’ the containers fast as we can. Two of us will start Apparatin’ the stuff back to our holds while the others work on the shrinkin’. We’ll switch off so nobody gets too dizzy.”

Harry nodded. That didn’t sound hard.

“Reception team are the ones the Apparators give the goods to. They’re in charge of makin’ sure that it’s stored the right way – preservation charms, charms to ensure that the initial shrinkin’ don’t wear off, refrigeration, that sort of thing. Chester listens in to the muggles’ radio transmissions to make sure they ain’t on ta us. Won’t do ta have them reportin’ that wizards are on their boat. That’s why we got two folks who’re dab hands at obliviation at the ready in case we need it. The magical governments don’t care much that we do this – hell, they need us to do this – but ain’t no stoppin’ jail time if they catch us breakin’ the Statue of Secrecy. Last team – the mercs on standby – are in case we have to fight for some reason.” Dag smiled. “But this one is routine. Should be easy.”

An hour and a half and several tons of various foodstuffs later, Harry agreed with Sticky. That had been easy.

Burke, Sticky, Harry, and the rest of the primary team had cast Silencing and Disillusionment charms on themselves before leaving The Delight – Harry made a mental note to learn the last one as well as he could – and then Apparated onto the transport’s deck. The two muggle crewmen who were on guard never noticed them as they continued to play a card game.

The Captain seemed familiar with this type of boat and easily led the team down into the ship’s sprawling holds. A Point-Me spell showed them the way to the section that held huge shipping containers filled with sack after sack of grain. Someone canceled the charms and the now-visible and audible team got to work.

Burke moved to Harry’s side. “We just shrink the shipping containers themselves, Harry. Goes a lot faster that way. Sure, it’s exhausting and notifies the muggles that something’s missing, but it wouldn’t be sporting to let them think they still have all their cargo until they reach their port.”

“I – I feel kind of bad for them, actually.” Harry admitted. “Won’t the crewmen get in trouble with their bosses because they lost stuff worth so much money? I don’t want some poor guy to get sacked because of me.”

Burke sighed. “Yeah, that’s a possible consequence. But if we don’t steal from this boat to meet wizarding Britain’s need, some other ship will just steal from another boat. And a lot of them aren’t
as nice to muggle sailors as we are. Lots of unexplained sinkings and loss of life can be attributed to pirates who don’t hold much value for muggles.”

Harry nodded slowly. That made some sense, but he still felt niggling guilt. But I signed on to be a pirate, so it’s a bit late to get too moral, he supposed. With a regretful sigh he got to work shrinking containers so that Red Nora and a little Spanish wizard everyone called Blitzer could start Apparating them back to The Delight.

Half an hour into the heist, a sudden booming echo had everyone in the hold freeze and then recast their Disillusionment charms.

“What the hell –”

“Door alarm,” Burke whispered to Harry. “I set it in case any muggles came in. They can’t hear it. Now quiet and stay still.”

He made out the quiet progression of a pair of footsteps in the distance, near the entrance to the hold.

“Vincenzo, Gigi, standby.” The Captain spoke softly into an opened poison ring that Harry figured must allow him to communicate with the Obliviation team back on The Delight.

A few minutes later, however, the footsteps retreated and they heard the hold door shut. Harry held his breath.

“All clear, lovelies, back to work!” Caffrey grinned and then canceled the Obliviation standby. “See Harry, pirating’s easy!”

Harry shook his head with a smile and got back to shrinking the grain-filled shipping containers.

1 June, 1978

Harry and Aberforth were sitting at one of the tables in the Head reading sections of the Prophet and sipping their morning tea.

“Minchum isn’t more careful he’s gonna get himself killed or kicked outta office,” Ab remarked and sat back with a resounding belch. “I’m missin’ the days when politicians least had the spine to pretend to stand for somethin’.”

“Yeah …” Harry agreed, his brow furrowing as he put aside the Quidditch stats. Something isn’t right. He shook off the feeling of wrongness squirming in his gut. “You want to go and practice in the Forest today? Should be a slow lunch. I, well, I kinda miss doing it with you lately.”

“Aye, that’ll be nice enough. I can teach you what’s wrong with some a’ them flashy spells a’ yours. You’ve been missing it, lad.”

Harry shook his head. “No, I know. Caffrey Burke showed me on the ship the other day. I can’t believe I’ve been missing that!”

I’m missing … I miss … you’re missing … I’ve been missing …

I’m missing … I miss … you’re missing … I’ve been missing …

Harry felt his body shiver, the hairs on the back of his neck suddenly crackling with electricity.
“This … this isn’t real, is it Ab? This isn’t happening?” Please say I’m crazy, I’m a damn fool. That I’m wrong.

Aberforth put down his mug of tea and cast a speculative eye on Harry. “You ain’t always a fool, lad.” His voice was gentle, the voice of a man who’d spend a night in the barn to make sure a panic-stricken teenager he barely knew was all right.

“No … And this … you’re, you’re dead. But you’re here now …” Cold certainty sank into his bones. “You’re here because I miss you. Because I’ve been missing you every day.” The words seemed to form hands as they left his mouth, hands that wrapped around his throat to choke him. Harry felt tears spilling out of his eyes, coursing down his face faster than they should have been able to. They streamed onto the floor of the Head and quickly – far, far too quickly – collected into a saltwater flood that, in the space of the time it takes to lose a breath, were already rising to Harry’s waist.

The young wizard paid the mounting floodwaters of his tears no notice. Ab regarded him steadily even as the sudden tide reached his chin, his iron-gray hair swirling around his head in curls and waves, making him look like Triton or Nereus himself.

Harry blinked.

I’m missing … I miss … you’re missing … I’ve been missing …

“I miss you so much, Ab.”

Sudden shouting battered at the edges of Harry’s consciousness.

“’Course you do, Harry,” Ab agreed even as the waters swallowed them both down. “You’ll always miss me. ‘Cause you’re my boy.”

… BOY MAKE A BIG NOISE, PLAYIN’ IN THE STREET –

Harry shot up from his bunk just before dawn and smacked his head on his pornography-papered ceiling. “Whazgoinon Ab?”

Freddy Mercury, whose voice was being magically piped through the galleon at an obscene volume, didn’t respond but to claim that Harry was a “BIG DISGRACE, KICKING YOUR CAN –”

The young wizard rubbed his aching head and wiped his wet cheeks, cursing the dream of Ab for being so bloody real. And what the hell is Caffrey doing playing Queen this early in the morning? He clambered into a pair of jeans, skipped his boots, and left his cabin barefoot in a half-awake rush before knocking hard into Red Nora in the hall.

WE WILL, WE WILL, ROCK YOU!

“Whazgoin–”

“Friendly fight time!” the large woman exclaimed in what Harry had learned was a south Texas accent, her eyes twinkling with excitement. “Another ship’s here and we’re gonna have ourselves a little brawl. No killin’, maimin’, or anything that can’t be healed in a day or so!” With that she nearly skipped off, wand out and smile growing.
Oh. Okay, I guess. Friendly fight time it is.

SINGIN’, WE WILL, WE WILL, ROCK YOU!

Yeah … yeah I could use a good fight.

He shoved the thoughts of Ab and all the despair they brought in their wake away. With his adrenalin beginning to pump, Harry cast a clumsy Disillusionment charm on himself and moved quietly above decks.

Merlin, it really looks like a pirate battle.

The three main decks topside were filled with pirates engaged in various duels. Some had banded together against groups of the “enemy,” others were squaring off against single adversaries. He spied Ches in the fighting top on the foremast, pelting members of the other crew with whatever the man had happened to find. To the direct right of the ship – abeam to the starboard, Harry corrected himself – loomed the Elizabeth, Peadar Burke’s vessel.

Harry grinned. Yeah, a friendly fight could be fun.

A quick glance up at the quarter deck confirmed that Caffrey and Peadar Burke were duking it out near the wheel. While he wanted to watch the brothers square off, he wasn’t interested enough to just play the spectator.

He crouched down behind one of the long boats on the main deck and spotted a small gang of Elizabeth pirates advancing on Sticky Dag and another crewmember.

“Perpolio!” Harry’s exaggerated floor polishing charm struck the deck just beneath the enemy’s feet, sending them tumbling in a mass. Sticky laughed out a thanks to Harry and quickly bound the lot of them.

Another few were engaging some of the mercenary wanna-bes who were defending the stairs to the forecastle. Harry hesitated for a moment, unsure how he felt about attacking someone whose back was turned.

Well, I am a pirate right now. Isn’t that sort of what we do?

Casting several targeted scouring charms at the sailors’ arses, he doubled over giggling when they forgot the fight in favor of clamping their hands on their backsides in surprise. Good to know that sudden scrubbing down there has to be distracting! As they wheeled around he hit three with temporary blinding hexes, and bound the last one.

He was so captivated by the sailors’ unwilling anal cleansing that he almost missed it when Amber Satchmo, first mate on The Elizabeth, came at him, wand drawn. “Accio barrel!” Harry shouted frantically as he barely dodged a chain of stunning and bone-breaking spells. He winced in sympathy at the dull thud the woman made as she fell over unconscious on the deck.

Dammit, that barrel was heavy. She could actually be really hurt. With a guilty frown Harry moved over to the woman to start casting a few diagnostic spells he had learned from Madam Pomfrey. He had just enough time to register several streaking lights headed his way before he was sinking down into unconsciousness next to Satchmo.

“Now Harry, during a fight is it wise to drop everything and start casting medical charms on the
enemy in the middle of the bloody deck?” Caffrey Burke seemed caught between amusement and exasperation as Harry blinked himself awake.

“Sorry, Cap’n,” Harry mumbled. “Is Satchmo okay? Didn’ mean to hit her s’hard as I did.” He shook his head to clear the ringing out of his ears.

“How very gallant you are,” Burke snorted. “She’s fine enough. The Elizabeth’s already about to be on her way northerly to terrorize the U.S. ships, anyway.”

“Real gentleman, this one,” Nora murmured, to the amusement of the rest of the small crowd gathered around them. “But stupid.”

“Sorry,” Harry repeated awkwardly. “I wouldn’t have done it if she were a real enemy, you know.” He tried to get up only to find that it was a very bad idea.

She rolled her eyes. “You’ve got a broken ankle, several fucked up ribs, and a number of boils growing on some very sensitive bits, chevo. Don’t move.”

He nodded absently and took the potions that Burke handed him. As he drifted off to sleep, he absently hoped that someone would at least care enough to levitate him to his bed. I’ve still got a lot to learn, was the last thought that crossed his mind.

2 June, 1978

The next morning a rather shame-faced and largely healed Harry trudged topside, prepared to be ribbed by the crew for his stupidity in the friendly brawl.

His expectations were not disappointed.

By noon it seemed everyone on board had gotten at least one dig in. Red Nora, however, finally took pity on him.

“Look, that was fucking dumb, but you showed that you were clever with some of those spells.”

Harry gaped. His impression had been that the towering American woman wasn’t one to be overly kind. “Er, thanks Nora.”

“But I’m betting you have no clue about standard high-power spells, or spells that force your enemy to go on the defensive, right?”

He shrugged. “Um, Reducto or Bombarda maybe? I also have this one spell that uses wasps to attack people …”

“Christ,” Nora drawled. “That last one sounds interesting maybe, and the other two aren’t bad, but they’re almost kid stuff, just the first step in battle magics!” She frowned and dug the toe of her cowgirl boots into the deck. “Fine then. We start training today. Caff’s gonna show you most of the offensive spells you need to know, but I can show you the shit he doesn’t like to use.”

“Huh?” Harry managed. “I mean, that would be great! But … uh … why?”

The woman pursed her lips. “I know you’re Ab’s boy. Met him a few times,” she finally said in a terse voice. “I liked him. And since Burke is sweet on you as his ‘apprentice,’ whatever the hell that means, I figure that if I help you, I can wrangle my way out of cooking duty.”
“Oh. Well, thanks, then.” Realization hit him. *If she knows I’m Ab’s, then* … “Really, thanks. But could you please not mention that I was the one at Ab’s? They might realize I was the one who was pretending to be a squib. I have to stop when I go home later this summer, but I just dunno, I don’t want …”

“Christ’s sake, kid, none of us care about your drama. Now get moving or I’ll hex your *pelotas* off.” Nora’s brief flirtation with sensitivity seemed to be over. Harry only had a sneaking suspicion what his *pelotas* were, but he was certain he’d prefer them unhexed and very much still on.

An hour later Harry was balancing precariously on a long boat while Red Nora, her thick black braid whipping about, strode up and down its length, seemingly unconcerned with its violent listing as it trailed after *The Bachelor’s Delight*. When Caffrey had learned the sorts of spells Nora intended to teach him, he’d laid down the law and kicked them off the ship to practice. “*No one,*” the man hissed as he lovingly stroked the polished wooden railing of *The Delight*, “*is going to hurt my girl.*”

It became immediately apparent that the American mercenary favored fire in a way that left Harry – and Caffrey – absolutely petrified, and probably explained the brunette’s otherwise inexplicable nickname. Completely at ease in the rocking boat, Nora ran through demonstrations of Fire Whips, Fire Walls, and a Colombian explosive hex called *Explotar Dentro* which literally made a person or thing explode from the inside out. Her personal favorite, however, was *Bola de Fuego*, a fireball that could track a target like a honing missile.

*Jesus, Mary, and Merlin.* Harry could feel his jaw dropping like an idiot, but he couldn’t manage to stop. “You’re – wow – you’re brilliant!”

Nora’s tight little grin barely cracked her weathered face. “Oh, shut up and pay attention! Anyway, the incantation for the Fire Whip is *Flagellum Ignis*, and the wand motion is like this –” She brandished her wand like she was cracking a whip. “It take a lot of power until you get used to it, so don’t hold back.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Oh! You want me to do it now?”

Nora glared. “Yes, Harry, now you do it.” She clapped her hands sharply and slipped into Spanish to curse, as she seemed to do when she was cranky.

“Er –”

“Just cast the fucking spell, Harry.”

Harry cast the fucking spell.

An hour later he was absolutely exhilarated and thoroughly exhausted as he clamored up the foremast to lounge in its crow’s nest. He could tell by Nora’s arched eyebrow that he had done much better with the fire spells than she had expected, though he suspected some, like the tracking fireball, might be forever outside his abilities. “Well, *culicagado*, you aren’t half shit,” was all Nora had said, which Harry took to be the highest of compliments.

He stayed in the crow’s nest for hours, the crisp salt air acting as a purifier for his mind. As the ship sailed on for the Caribbean, Harry fancied he could almost feel the future thrumming ahead of him. For now, that future would include what he imagined to be colorful, spice-filled island cities and South American paradises teeming with interesting new things to divert him, at least for a moment, from the gaping hole left by Ab’s death. But beyond the palm trees and rainforests, wizarding Britain
and a new future that hadn’t been written, even for him, awaited.

There are things to do.

Decisions to make.

The names of those who would need saving and those who would need … neutralizing tattooed themselves on his mind. Lily and James. Sirius. Frank and Alice. So far as he knew, he had time. But there was no way of being absolutely certain that the next three and some years would play out in this world as they had done in his own.

I have to figure out what to do about Wormtail. Harry ground his teeth in frustration. Part of him screamed to make up for his mistake that night in the Shrieking Shack. It would be easy enough, he reasoned, to track down Pettigrew and end the chance of him betraying the Potters with a single spell and a slash of his wand. But what if this Peter is … different? Better? I’m not going to kill innocent people just because of what they might do.

Ab wouldn’t want me to be that sort of person.

And then there was the bloody basilisk which he assumed was still sequestered in the bowels of Hogwarts. He had nearly fallen overboard the week before when the realization that the thing had to still be down there suddenly hit him out of nowhere. Pel and Ab had confirmed a rash of petrifications back in the 40s and there was no report that anyone had ever discovered the true culprit.

It has to be there. And it’s a weapon that I can’t let Voldemort use ever again. Dammit, why couldn’t I have thought of this when I was still doing my service to wizards and had daily access to the school!

He’d just have to resume lessons with Madam Pomfrey when he got back and figure out a way to sneak down to the girl’s lavatory, he concluded.

But as the sun slowly began sinking ahead of him, it was Voldemort and the war that occupied his mind the most. The mock-battle the day before had truly scared him in retrospect. Not because there was any real danger, but because he’d realized afterwards that he had no idea what wizarding wars actually entailed. Sure, he had fought plenty against enemies who wanted to kill him, but those had always been him against an opponent. He wasn’t used to fighting an enemy with people who were actually on his side. The chaos of the friendly brawl, the sheer multitude of dangers that one had to be on guard against, terrified him in their complexity.

War is a lot more than just being good at offensive and defensive spells. It doesn’t matter how well I can cast a Fire Whip if I’m clipped in the first minute of a battle.

If I’m going to war, I have to learn what real wizarding battles mean. How to fight them. How to protect my allies and damage the enemy at the same time. This isn’t the dueling club or even Macnair’s house, where I could focus on a single danger. Hell, it’s not even the Dementors in third year. It’s so much messier than all that.

He smiled ruefully as the stars began to shine down on the lonely ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. I guess it’s a good thing I’m on a ship filled with bored mercenaries and pirates, then.

14 June, 1978
Harry greeted the warm Caribbean sun with a grin. For the first time in a long time, he felt truly excited for the coming day.

That wasn’t to say that the last two weeks hadn’t been useful – enjoyable even, at times. He’d convinced Red Nora to let him practice with the mercenary wanna-bes, and they’d even staged a mock battle most afternoons. True, he had hardly morphed into the ultimate magical badass in those ten days, but by day three he was no longer the last fighter picked for the scrimmage teams, so that was something. Yesterday the team captain had even picked him third.

Caff Burke watched it all carefully, and took the time to talk Harry through each of his decisions, the good and the bad. Irrepressibly inappropriate the man may be, but he was, Harry discovered, a damn fine and thoughtful teacher.

They’d raided five more Muggle vessels as they set their course for Cuba. However, after days spent in mock-battles, a night spent shrinking and Apparating shipping containers paled in comparison. **Who would have thought that the actual pirating would be the least exciting thing to do on a pirate ship?**

Another wizarding pirate ship had attacked them and attempted to steal their stores – probably more out of boredom than anything else, Burke had figured – but its crew wasn’t coordinated or all that talented. **The Delight**’s men and women squashed the attempt with such ease that Harry found himself annoyed that he’d been woken up rather than excited.

But today … today they were making port in Havana. The name rolled off Harry’s tongue like a sweet fruit rolled in sugars and spices. Caff had given the entire crew shore leave for a full twenty-four hours before they had to report back to the ship to start raiding various warehouses. Apparently the upper crust of European wizarding society had quite the taste for Cuban cigars and rums, and Caffrey Burke was determined to make bank on it.

From the moment he left the port and followed the pale cobblestone streets into the Plaza de San Francisco, Havana had Harry. With its sheer variety of colors, smells, and sounds, the city was an assault on the senses of a British boy born to a world of neutral creams, tans, grays, and browns.

That afternoon he wandered old colonial avenues bounded by colorful buildings, stopping to purchase a bag of *chicarritas de platano* from a street cart manned by a boy about his age. Everywhere he went people tried to sell him things, to show him things, and most didn’t even blink when he politely declined. He did eventually purchase colorful postcards for Pel, Hagrid, the Dearborns, and Poppy. Catching sight of one that pictured a colorfully-painted ceramic cat looking out over the Havana harbor, he smiled and picked it up for Argus Filch.

As the unrelenting heat bore down on him, he used his slowly-dwindling funds to buy a pink guava milkshake and took a seat at the center of the Plaza Vieja to watch the steaming Cuban evening set in.

Red Nora, Sticky Dag, and a handful of the mercenaries found him there just as the scattered neon lights of the city began to glow.

“Oi, mate, we’re headed to Obispo Street to find a place for pints. Wanna come?”

Harry narrowed his eyes at Red Nora. She’d affected a fake – horribly fake – British accent. “Er, sure.” As he fell in with the group, he gave Nora a look that begged for an explanation.

“You stupid, *culicagado*, or just not paying attention? Everyone knows that the Americans have an embargo on Cuba. Can’t let them know I’m a U.S. citizen. Even the magical government here cares
about that crap, and that’s noise we don’t need.”

He nodded sagely – he hoped – and vaguely recalled that the United States and Cuba did have issues of some sort or another.

They made their way to the narrow Obispo Street, an avenue filled with restaurants and clubs, where all the various live music that seemed to be played everywhere engaged in a sort of friendly warfare for attention. Eventually they stopped at a small, nameless bar that Sticky Dag knew and filed into a long, narrow room filled with local patrons.

A little, older man who spoke broken English came over to take their drink orders. Harry paused when it was his turn.

Well, I am going to be a pub owner soon. I should probably do some, er, research? Yes, Hermione would approve of me doing research … He thought suddenly of Myrtle firing a gun at him. For science then!

“Uh, I’ll just take whatever drink is really popular in Cuba, please.”

Nora and the mercenaries looked deeply disappointed in him, and Sticky laughed. “We’ll, ye’ve jus’ painted us all as ruddy tourists, mate.”

They have no appreciation for science.

A mojito and a Cuban ginger later, and Harry didn’t care enough to be embarrassed by his faux pas. He sipped on the Saoco that had just replaced the ginger – his eyes had widened when he saw that the drink came in an actual coconut – and let the sound of clamoring Spanish and acoustic guitars wash over him.

With a sudden start he realized that the mercenaries’ conversation had drifted to the war in Britain when he made out words like “purebloods” and “Death Eaters.”

“Fuckin’ pureblood scum,” he heard himself slur out. Oh. Think these drinks’re stronger than I thought.

“Hey, fuck you, kid!” Nora shot back, losing her fake accent for a moment. “You think all purebloods support pieces of shit like that?”

Harry frowned, thinking of all the pureblood members of the Wizengamot who opposed Voldemort. Of Dumbledore and his dad. Dad’s dimenshunal counterpart, he attempted to correct himself. No, counter … counter … counterpart. Yeah, that’s the word. Yeah, time to slow down on the coconut thing, Potter. “Well, no, not all’a’ em, I know tha’.”

“Good. Don’t you go lumping me and Sticky in with them. Jeez, Caff hears that kinda talk, he’ll string you up.”

Sticky laughed drunkenly and toasted Nora.

“Wait –” Harry’s mind struggled to keep up. “Sticky, you mean tha’ you an’ Caff are purebloods?” The very idea seemed shocking.

“’Course we are! Why wouldja think we’re not?”

“Well, I mean, c’mon … Caff … Caff knows who Queen is. Who David Bowie is!” This seemed very conclusive evidence against the Captain’s alleged pureblood genealogy.
Nora snorted and the other mercs rolled their eyes. “We spend half our time in the muggle world, chevo. We aren’t deaf and blind. Yeah, Caff grew up a pureblooded poncy Brit. Doesn’t mean he can’t like Freddie Mercury.”

Harry fumbled to push the tipsy cloud out of his mind. “So, why’s he a pirate then? S’at doesn’t seem … normal.”

Dag broke in. “Well, ol’ Peadar got into the life when he got disowned for marrying that muggle girl, didn’t he? Sad thing she died so young … Anyhow, ol’ man Burke wouldn’t stand for that sorta thing in his house. Then all his ‘heritance n’ shares in the business were set to go ta Caff, but he refused to marry that Parkinson bint his daddy set up for him, and told the lot of ‘em to go to hell.”

“Way I heard it,” Nora interrupted, “was that his actual words were ‘sorry grandfather, but I’m for pretty boys with pretty cocks. I can’t spoil little Caffrey by subjecting him to pussy.’”

“No way he said that,” one of the younger mercs gasped as some of the others choked on their drinks. “Seriously?”

Nora and Dag shrugged. “Don’t know, really,” Dag continued. “Makes a good tale, though. Anyhow, Caff refused to get married and continue on the proud Burke line. It’s not like ol’ Caractacus or any a the old upper crust cared if a bloke was bent, so long as he put an heir in a wife’s belly. But Caff wasn’t havin’ non’a it. Buggered off and joined up with Peadar.” The man spat on the floor. “Course it made me brother thrilled. No more Burkes set to inherit made sure he got the shop. Then the bastard tried an’ tell me what ta do, so I tol’ him where ta stick that and joined up with Caff! More fun anyway.”

“So the moral of the story is, we all have jobs because Caffrey Burke is a principled little ponce who can’t abide pussy,” Nora grinned.

Harry’s fuddled mind snagged on something Sticky had said. Wait … shop? Burke? “Hey Dag, your las’ name doesn’ ‘appen to be, um – (what was it?) – um, Borgin, huh?”

“Yeah, mate, ‘course it is. Me an’ Caff’s family been in business together one way or ‘nother for more’n a century.”

*Well I’ll be damned. I’m working for Borgins and Burkes!*

As the conversation tilted away from Caffrey Burke’s background and the British war, Harry wondered idly if Sticky Dag’s brother was the man he’d seen buying Dark objects from Lucius Malfoy back before his second year.

He was startled out of his befuddled musings when he realized that a warm, firm thigh was pressed closely to his own, and that a slender arm was draped lazily over his shoulders. Turning, his eyes widened when he saw that he was quite cuddled up to a lovely young woman at most a few years older than he was, with dark hair and clever eyes who was making jokes in Spanish with some of the mercs.

“‘Lo,” he grinned, noticing suddenly that the woman’s top was more an artfully-draped scarf than an actual blouse. “I don’ know you.”

She laughed deep in her throat and murmured something *absolutely lovely* in Spanish. He had no idea what she’d said, but it seemed *brilliant*.

Time seemed to blur and slide past him.
The girl was now more in his lap, and he was toasting something that somebody had said with a small glass of something that was also brilliant.

Time blurred.

Sticky was saying something in a quiet voice to a dark-haired woman perched on his own lap. A commanding finger and thumb grasped his chin, turning his face back to the girl in the scarf-blouse. “Don’ know your name, mizz,” he slurred.

She kissed his neck and their lack of formal introductions no longer seemed a pressing issue.

Time blurred.

The girl was pulling him along the cobbled street through a steaming rain that blanketed the neon-dark city. The smell of jasmine and roasting pork, the strains of a slow melody played on a staticky radio surrounded him. He laughed.

Time blurred.

Being soaked to the skin had sobered him just enough to realize that the man in front of him was asking for money. I must be buying something. He handed the last of his meager funds over and followed the girl down a long orange-tiled hallway framed by walls of peeling turquoise.

Time blurred.

Thankfully, he was sobering up, albeit very slowly, and realized that he was in a bedroom, its terrace doors thrown wide open to let in the Havana night. He took a long drink of something from the cup in his hands before surprisingly-strong arms drew him downwards onto a bed, the softness of its sheets nothing in comparison to the softness of the body underneath him. He looked into large dark eyes and realized his hands were wound in black curls. “Oh. Hello.”

A muffled, sarcastic, and not so drunk voice in his head said something about maybe saying something a bit more clever, but that voice was immediately drowned out by a far more excited one sputtering in drunken shock. Holy shite! I’m – holy shite! I’m going to have sex! Wait – He looked down and saw that yes, the young woman beneath him was quite naked and her legs were spread wide in welcome – Yes, yes, I’m definitely going to have sex!

This … this is so cool.

One more startled look down assured him that yes, he was also naked and yes, his cock definitely looked amenable to the prospect of the impending extinction of his virginity.

“Vas a moverte?” the girl murmured as she ran her hands over down his back.

Huh, that sounds really sexy … Say something nice! Should a learned enough from the crew by now.

He assumed what he hoped was a confident, dashing smile. “La oveja es un bigote,” he managed.

She burst out laughing and grabbed his – oh dear Jesus holy that’s – with authority. Oh, Okay. We’re doing this now? Well, okay then!

Harry bent over, suspecting it would be a good idea to give her breasts some attention. He found himself mesmerized by the alien quality of the warm globes. Like the rest of the curvaceous woman, they were soft and … poofy? Don’t think I should call them poofy … Prolly a better word.
He gave one of her nipples a tentative lick while he squeezed the other, terribly worried about his lack of knowledge regarding breasts. *This too hard? Don’ wanna hurt her … How tough are these things, anyway?*

It was all rather daunting.

A few more licks and fumbled squeezes later and he gave her breasts up as far beyond his current skill level. Instead he slipped his hands down her waist and hips, marveling at the way her body curved and swelled in all sorts of fascinating ways. Cupping her arse, his confidence rose. *It’s an arse. I have one. Arses are arses, after all. Yes, I can do this.*

*And I’ll do a damn good job!*

And then she grabbed his hand and slipped it between her legs.

*I am truly in a foreign country now.*

A few minutes later he had the distinct impression that he was *not* doing a damn good job. With a huff the girl rolled him over onto his back and straddled him, slipping his shaft effortlessly into herself. He nearly choked on his own tongue in surprise.

*Oh dear – hell.*

She rode him at a steady pace, until it finally occurred to Harry that maybe he should actually *do* something as well. With far gentler, more tentative jerks of his hips he thrust himself up and grabbed onto her arse.

The whole thing was … very, very pleasant, he thought with absent, drunken honesty as he watched the girl work herself over his cock. He found himself quite pleased that he seemed to be lasting much longer than he suspected teenage virgins typically did. At least if the talk in the Gryffindor Common Room had been any indication, that was.

She – *dammit, what’s her name?!* – appeared a bit less thrilled with his staying power, and began thrusting herself down on his groin even more violently. *Doesn’t that hurt her? Don’t wanna hurt her …*

Scarf-Shirt Girl didn’t seemed overly bothered, and it did feel really *good.*

Eventually the warmth, the wetness, the amazing friction culminated in a long, lovely moment of release.

And then he was done having sex.

*Huh. I’m not a virgin anymore.*

Harry blinked. *That was … very nice. A strange surge of disappointment welled in him.*

The young woman rolled off of him and immediately began getting dressed.

*Oh.*

*Ouch.*

“Um, thank you. Thank you very much …”

The girl barely looked at him. *“Me resbala. Me debes la mitad del dinero.”*
Harry frowned. She seemed much less excited to be with him now. “I don’t know much Spanish at all, I’m sorry.”

She snorted as she deftly rearranged her scarf/shirt to cover her nipples. “Dinero. Money. Now other half.”

“Other half? Other half of what?”

The girl glared. “The money, man.”

Harry felt his heart sink and he suddenly felt even drunker, though not in a heady, excited way. She’s … she’s a prostitute. He looked at his discarded jeans in the far corner, knowing full well that the wallet in the back pocket was now definitely empty of muggle money.

*Oh this is seriously not good.*

. . . . .

Five minutes later and Harry was taking no delight in being proven correct about the situation. *At least I managed to get my boots on,* he thought as he pounded down the near-deserted streets of the city towards the harbor, wearing nothing but said boots, his wand and knife holster, and the mokeskin bag.

*What the ever-living fuck, boy!?* Ab’s voice groused in his head.

*My clothes were on the other side of the room. She’s a Muggle, so I couldn’t just use Accio. It was a sound tactical decision, Ab!*

He wanted to close his eyes when he thought about what Aberforth would have said about the fact that he had to jump off a third-floor terrace (thank Merlin for a discreetly-cast Cushioning Charm on his way down) to escape the girl’s boss and a number of other men who were quite intent on making him pay the other half of a fee he simply didn’t have.

Their shouts still pursued him as he followed his nose and raced for the harbor.

*Almost there, almost there …*

He rounded a final corner and the harbor opened up before him. Ship after ship lay at anchor, and it seemed this was the most awake quarter of the city.

Judging by the whistles and catcalls that followed him down the piers, he was correct.

*Oh good God. Why didn’t I just fucking Apparate!?* he thought suddenly, amazed at his idiocy.

*You Apparate drunk and you deserve to splinch your bollocks, boy,* Ab’s voice broke in.

Determined to maintain at least a sliver of his self-respect, Harry slowed his pace (*they can’t still be following me*) as he approached *The Bachelor’s Delight.* He could hear Chester laughing as he walked up the gangway onto the deck, attempting valiantly to keep his head held high.

“Well now, this night just got exponentially better,” Caffrey Burke said from behind him.

Harry closed his eyes and cupped his nethers in his hands before turning around. “There was a … a misunderstanding,” he said with quiet dignity.

Caffrey stared at him for a moment before falling over on the deck laughing.
“Oh shut it, you bastard.”

The man laughed harder, but at least tossed Harry his own long outer robe.

“Nora told me you left with a prostitute, but this is … is …” The Captain seemed unable to find the right words for what ‘this’ was.

Harry, having drunkenly wrapped himself in Burke’s robe, turned and made for the stairs that would take him to his cabin. The Captain, to his dismay, scrambled to follow him.

“So-ooo, how did you find your entree into the wonderful world of heterosexuality?”

“Other than the having to jump out a window an’ run from angry pimps part, it was nice,” Harry snapped. His cabin door was in sight. Thank Merlin. Just want to get dressed and pass out.

Caffrey gasped in mock horror. “Nice? Nice? Harry, my love, sex isn’t supposed to be nice.”

The younger man just grunted. His head hurt, his stomach felt … delicate, and he was never drinking that much alcohol ever again.

“Oh hell, this is incredibly depressing,” Caffrey pronounced with authority to himself.

Before Harry could react, the Captain had somehow gotten in front of him and was smoothly maneuvering him so that his back was against the wall. “Wha –”

Caffrey’s lips on his own and his tongue in Harry’s mouth cut off the question. He pressed himself firmly against Harry’s body, one hand on the back of his neck, the other cupping his arse as he attempted to snog the life out of the young man.

Oh for fuck’s sake this is ridicul –

Except, Harry realized, he was still very naked under the robe and his cock, to his absolute horror, had already sprang to attention like a damn puppy itching to play. A thrumming heat coiled in his groin, and an electric buzzing filled his head.

Bloody hell, did I just moan?

He felt the Captain smile into the kiss.

Dammit bloody fuck, I did just moan.

When Caffrey’s hand increased the pressure on the nape of his neck and his faint stubble grazed Harry’s cheek, his cock hardened impossibly and fairly vibrated with a deep pulse of pleasure far more intense than anything he’d felt in the bed of Scarf-Shirt Girl.

It’s a biological reaction, biological reaction, biological reaction echoed nonsensically in his mind as his traitorous body arched into Burke’s.

And then the Captain gave Harry’s bottom lip a final, teasing lick and backed up to the other side of the narrow hallway, eyes twinkling darkly.

“Tell me, Harry love, you’re still drunk and you certainly don’t love me … but wasn’t that much better than nice?”

Harry’s mouth was open but he could only gasp out panting breaths.
“I’m guessing that’s a yes. Absolutely fascinating, isn’t it? Well, g’night, love.” Caffrey gave him a self-satisfied smirk and strode off back up the stairs.

**What? What the fucking goddamn-it-all was that all about?**

He went boneless against the wall for a moment before finding the strength to escape to his cabin and sleep off the crazy night. Thankfully his erection was already flagging, probably from pure befuddlement. He’d have to think about … everything later, but right now only one, true thought accompanied him into a thick drunken sleep.

*Sex is really confusing.*

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**18 July, 1978**

Harry shielded his eyes from the sun and checked the charms on the mizzenmast as *The Delight* sped in to the magical section of the Puerto de Montevideo. A half-smile graced his face as he thought about the upcoming shore leave, the first full day leave they’d had since Havana.

Sure, their stops in Baranquilla, Caracas, Porto Alegre and at least a half dozen other cities had been fun enough, but the crew had been put to work for most of their time in each place, raiding various storehouses and other ships. They only got to be lazy, it seemed, when they are out to sea. At this point the magically-expanded holds of *The Delight* were heaving with goods – which Burke insisted they call ‘booty’ – and they really only had room for takes from one more big stop.

It had been a fun month since their port in Havana. Of course Caffrey and Chester made certain that the entire crew knew all about Harry’s humiliating escape from angry pimps, but this seemed to endear him to the crew more than anything else. “Ain’t a proper pirate ‘til you’ve been chased naked through one town or ‘nother,” Sticky Dag had approved sagely.

Red Nora had scoffed. “You’re just lucky I was sober enough to hit you with a birth control charm before you left without takin’ off your boys, kid.”

Harry had blanched at that, doubly horrified by the prospect of the woman miscasting the charm and his absolute lack of forethought. *I have got to get her to teach me that charm as soon as possible.*

On the other hand, he’d been beyond relieved the next morning when Burke informed him that, after leaving Harry, he’d tracked down the girl and given her triple what she was owed. “Can’t have a nice young lady getting into trouble with her bosses because one of my boys is an idiot, now can I? We pay our debts on this ship.”

The younger wizard had stared at him flatly. “We’re pirates. We don’t pay for much of anything!”

“We’re gentlemen pirates … or at least I am.” He blithely ignored Harry’s derisive snort. “Hush up, lovely. You’re already in the hole with me for a week and a half’s pay.”

Thankfully, the Captain hadn’t mentioned their little encounter below decks again. Still, all too often his mind replayed his disappointing tryst with the anonymous prostitute (whom he now thought of as ‘Scarf-Shirt Girl’) and the subsequent (and honestly much more satisfying) snog with Caff Burke. Words he wasn’t used to having to think about kept randomly attacking his mind like persistent little mosquitoes. Terms like ‘gay,’ ‘homo,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘poof,’ all kept demanding his consideration at inopportune moments.

In response Harry had thrown himself into training, keeping Voldemort, the war, and those he must
save in the forefront of his mind while stowing naughty words and worries about looming gayness into the recesses. You’ve got a lot more to worry about than what that cock ‘a yours may want, he’d tell himself, casting Ab as the speaker.

Damn right!

Damn straight!

...  

Oh goddammit so much.

He trained every day now, with Red Nora and the mercs often but especially with the Captain. Near the end of June they’d been set upon by a Ecuadorian pirate vessel that proved a real threat. Caff, however, had managed a defense of the ship that sent the enemy running for their lives.

He may be a berk, but Caffrey Burke knows how to lead people. (*) How to win fights using a team.

I need to know how to do this.

The two had taken to going over hypothetical battle plans, with Caff patiently (and with only a few almost pro forma attempts at groping) talking Harry through how to best deploy his soldiers to capitalize most on their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. It was, Harry had to admit, hard going. He wasn’t naturally suited to team fighting, though his time with the mercs was slowly improving that. Instead, what most stymied his progress was his inability to sacrifice his people, even when the hypothetical situation demanded it.

At one point the Captain blew up at him in frustration, but Harry could only shrug.

“I’m not just going to order people to their deaths.”

Other times Caffrey alternated between improving his arsenal of spells and teaching him how to move and cast efficiently and intelligently. Thankfully, he was much more naturally suited to this than to being a general. Grace, balance, fluidity were all necessary for Seeking, after all. Harry had excelled from the very first day when a grinning Burke had ordered him to balance up on the foremast top yard and to start casting a variety of spells while having to block others sent at him. The man’s smile had faded into an impressed frown when Harry managed to keep his balance and hit the majority of his targets.

All in all, and occasional fretting about his sexuality notwithstanding, the last month on The Delight felt productive.

I’m getting better Ab. I really am.

But today they were going finally getting to Uruguay, and Harry had been looking forward to the shore leave for weeks. There were things he needed to know and, for once in his life, he had a plan.

He laughed a bit nervously as the crew on the decks responded to his wave with warnings to try keep his trousers on this time, and nearly ran down the gangway to the pier.

Once in the city, he pulled a crumpled piece of parchment from his pocket and scanned the directions – which he really had committed to memory – before setting out through the glittering seaside metropolis.

Twenty minutes later he was in a rather industrial section of town looking at an empty lot filled with
assorted rubbish. Closing his eyes, he quietly murmured what Alonzo had sworn was the password. “Casa de Encantamiento.”

Before his eyes reality seemed to shimmer and stretch as a grand, three-story, pink Spanish colonial mansion with a lush front garden popped into view.

Harry’s stomach fluttered. Deep breath, Potter, he encouraged himself.

With a steadying sigh, he made his way up the steps, down a colonnade, and through the imposing front door.

A sprawling lounge done in tasteful pastels and dark woods greeted him. Beautiful men and women in a variety of – his eyes widened– revealing states of dress lounged on comfortable-looking couches and divans, soaking in the mid-morning sun that streamed in through arched windows.

“Buenos días, mi corazón. ¿Con qué puedo deleitarte hoy?”

Harry turned to find a middle-aged, motherly woman in richly-appointed robes looking at him with a calculating, but not unkind, expression.

“Er, do you speak English, ma’am?”

She smiled broadly. “Of course, my dear. Welcome to the House of Enchantment! What may we delight you with today?”

Be cool. This is for science … or something.

“Well, I’m hoping to engage the um, services of a, er, woman here.”

The woman’s smile became much gentler and she clucked in a way that most certainly did not remind Harry of Molly Weasley. No, not at all. “Ah! ¿Eres virgen? Are you a virgin, little dear?”

Stop smiling at me like that!

“No! I mean, I’m not actually. But it didn’t um, go so well really …” Harry took a deep breath. Might as well tell her exactly what I want so I don’t ever, ever, ever have to do this again.

“I’m just … Okay, see, I was drunk and I’m not sure if I, well, really like woman? Like them that way, I mean. But I don’t know. And I’d really kind of like to. Know, that is. So, er, is there someone who works here who’s … nice that can help me? Oh, and this is how much I have,” he pulled out his small supply of wizarding money. “I really want to make sure it’s enough.”

She looked at him with a mischievous but still not unkind gleam in her eye. “I see, I see. Of course, Casa de Encantamiento can easily cater to your needs such that you can afford it. Let us see …” She scanned a parchment thoughtfully. “Ah, Abril would be perfect for you. Young, beautiful, speaks English well, and is very, very nice.” She touched her wand to the parchment and seconds later a lovely woman in her late teens or early twenties clad in a rather tasteful negligee made her way to the front. She and the matron engaged in murmured conversation in rapid Spanish as Harry’s face burned red. The arched look Abril sent him confirmed that the matron was telling her exactly why she was being hired.

Fine. Whatever. Let’s make today as embarrassing and horrific as possible. Fine.

The young woman smiled gently, took him by the hand, and led him up the stairs to a well-appointed
Though do we really need cherubs flying around on the ceiling? That’s just distracting. The animated cherubs seemed to hear his thoughts and leered down at him before flying down the wall, through the crack at the top of the doorway, and out into the hallway.

Abril grinned encouragingly and tugged lightly at the waistband of his denims. Harry gulped and smiled. “Um. Hello.”

Thirteen thoroughly awkward minutes later, Harry seriously considered the possibility that maybe he just wasn’t into people who had dark hair. Or were prostitutes. Or spoke Spanish? Really, she and Scarf-Shirt Girl have similar coloring and builds. I think. They’re probably just not my type.

Abril, whom he discovered was actually a student in a wizarding department of the nearby Universidad de la República studying sex magic and its therapeutic applications (this is something a person can go to university for? his mind sputtered), seemed an excellent listener. She coaxed that admission out of him before giving him a thoughtful look and leaving the room for a few minutes.

Eight absolutely exhilarating minutes later, Harry sat picking at the bed linens and confronting the likelihood that he was really, truly, very not interested in women after all.

Abril had returned with Agustin, a tall, dark-haired young man who seemed all lithe muscles and sinuous, hard lines. The next thing Harry knew, he was giving the male prostitute permission to “try a few things.” The results were … telling. Within two minutes Harry was desperately aroused and panting as Agustin pressed himself down to continue snogging him.

Okay. Okay. So Agustin speaks Spanish, has dark hair, and is a prostitute.

Huh.

Penis and all that goes with it is clearly the principal difference here. Shite.

“Oh! Um, wow – oh, please stop, Agustin!” Harry had finally gasped out. Okay. Yeah. Probably really gay then. Or maybe into other girls but definitely into men. Wow. The lovely man pulled back looking concerned as Abril smiled from the corner. “Um, thanks for that. Very helpful. Yes. But, er, I’m not really … I don’t really want to do anything more today. You’re great!” Harry had rushed on, “But I’m … yeah, I have to think about this for a while. But thanks.”

Agustin had shrugged and tipped him a wink before leaving the room.

Harry picked at the blanket, torn between thoughtfulness, confusion, and mild despondency.

Abril looked at Harry. “So, bo? Gay?”

“Oh, sí. Bloody mucho sí, I think.”

The young prostitute put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Bo, you have me for almost another hour.” She gave Harry the sort of smile he imagined a sister might give. “Want to do anything?”

Ten minutes later they were down in the main room, sitting at the bar and enjoying amazing sandwiches called chivitos. Gradually a small gaggle of prostitutes joined them and Harry found himself spending a fun afternoon being instructed in how to curse properly in Spanish by an enthusiastic crowd of bored, beautiful, scantily-clad people.
Well, he mused as he walked back to the port that evening, I’m probably gay and now I can tell someone to suck my cock, go to hell, or fuck my mother in Spanish.

I guess today was productive, at least.

22 July, 1978

“Prepare to set sail right fucking now, people!” Harry blinked from his position by the aft hawser as a shirtless and thoroughly disheveled Caffrey Burke Apparated onto the pier and ran full speed up the gangway, followed closely by a wheezing Sticky and a scowling Alonzo. “Everyone else is onboard, yes? Fabulous, let’s move, you scallywags!”

“Scallywags?” Harry mouthed to Chester.

The huge man shrugged. “Caff tends to go full pirate when he’s stressed out.”

“Green eyes! Less talking, more getting us the fuck out of here. Get to the aft charms!”

Three minutes later and The Bachelor’s Delight was pulling out of Montevideo. They were nearly to the breakwaters when Harry spied a veritable platoon of men popping into view. He grabbed an Omniscope and zoomed in on the crowd of furious men as they split into four groups and raced down the pier.

“Tell me they aren’t forming teams and heading for ships, Harry love.”

“They’re forming teams and heading for ships, Cap’n,” Harry deadpanned to the anxious man at this side.

“Oh lovely,” Caff groaned. “Okay, mates!” He clapped his hands. “The plan is to go very, very fast. We’ll dive once we’re past the shallows and try to avoid them that way. We’re going to have, well, we’re likely going to have a few ships worth of disgruntled Guilda boys coming at us.”

The crew gaped.

“And now’s when we do things fast, people! Mercs, be on standby. You lot – start prepping the diving charms. This might get a little interesting.”

“So I take it the party at Mama POMBAGIRAS’ didn’t go quite as planned?” Harry murmured.

The Captain had been pursuing a potentially lucrative contract with Mama Macumba Pombagiras, the undisputed head of the Guilda da Amazonia, the loose collective of South American, European, African, and Micronesian hunters who scoured the Amazon for some of the most dangerous and rare potions ingredients in the world. The hunters themselves, a talented and vicious lot, were feared all over South America, but their leader, the ancient Mama Pombagiras, had reached near-legendary status for her stranglehold on the market and ruthlessness in dealing with competitors and allies alike.

Caffrey had hoped that he could secure a deal that would leave him her principal contact for British distribution. Tonight, during her annual tour of Uruguay, she and her massive extended family were hosting a lavish fête, and the Captain had secured an invitation for himself, a date, and his first mate.

“That would be a no. It was obvious half an hour in that she had eyes only for the MACUSA representative. Apparently the States are very interested in cornering the market, and they have the gold to push everyone else out. I …” Caffrey actually blushed, to Harry’s shock, “I decided to give it
“Caffrey?” Harry asked, fully aware that he sounded like an angry parent.

“That should be more like ‘who’,” Alonzo spat out.

The Captain cringed. “In my defense, no one saw fit to inform me that he was her youngest and favorite great-grandson And nineteen is entirely legal!”

Red Nora was standing close enough to overhear. “So you’re saying you fucked the kid and now the most dangerous witch in South America and her little army are coming for you and your cock?”

“That’s one way to put it, I suppose.” Burke looked shamefaced. “I may have borrowed some product samples on the sly as well.”

“Christ, Caffrey, you are a dog,” Harry muttered in wonder.

Alonzo huffed his agreement.

One of the mercs interrupted with a shout. “Cap’n, we got sails in view behind us!”

“All right people, let’s prepare to dive and lose these bastards. We’re goin’ home!”

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23 July, 1978 (again)

Harry grinned as the man he’d snapped with a Fire Javelin went down with a sizzle of skin. His opponent wouldn’t die from the injury, but he was out for the count. “Incarcerous!”

In the end four ships had pursued The Delight. Caff had eventually managed to lure two of them into an encounter with a MEC (the magical government of Colombia) ship while they slipped away. The third had overtaken them while they were in a dive – Harry didn’t want to ever experience the terror of being attacked from a surface vessel while submerged deep in the Atlantic again – but they had managed to take out a section of the enemy ship’s hull and leave them to limp towards one of the Virgin Islands, desperately casting sealing charm after sealing charm.

They had thought themselves safe when they were several hundred miles east of Bermuda, but the last of Mama’s ships proved itself more intractable than the others.

*And these guys aren’t pulling any punches,* Harry thought grimly as another threesome of Mama’s men clamped towards him.

Sticky was on shielding duty, so he and Red Nora stood back to back casting quick and dirty at the enemy. Everywhere he looked, the mercs and other crewmen had teamed up to take on the staggering number of men that kept power-leaping and short-burst Apparating onto their decks.

“We can’t keep this up, kid,” Red Nora murmured. Her voice was dead calm, but Harry could feel the muscles of her back going rigid with concern.

*Yeah. She’s right. There’s too many.*

Something Caffrey had said back near the beginning of his time on the ship suddenly occurred to him.

“Caff, Blitzer, Dulce!” He called to the fighters closest to his little group, “Help Nora and Sticky
Harry didn’t wait for a response, trusting the others to go with him on this one. Eyes narrowed in concentration, he barely noticed when Nora barely managed to block a sickly violet curse from hitting him.

_Trust them. Focus. Ignore everything else._

He kept his eyes fixed on the main mast of the enemy caravel. Magical sailors were _obsessed_ with protecting their masts from every sort of offensive spell in existence. What they couldn’t do, however, was cast impermeable shields on them, since they needed access to charm them during a voyage.

_But they wouldn’t have protected their mast from a spell like this one. I’m sure of it._

After several long moments, he snapped his wand out and focused his will. “Panemseco!”

“Oh fuckin’ hell, kid!” Nora groaned.

Harry grinned as he watched the entire bottom half of the mast slowly begin to fall away in perfectly-sliced sections, exactly as the great tree in the Forbidden Forest once had. And, just like that tree, sections of the massive mast crashed into the fore and rear masts, sending them tumbling into the ship’s decks in a mass of splinters and sails. Within a few seconds the impact caused the caravel to capsize, while the chunks of falling wood punched huge holes in its hull.

The enemy crew still onboard their ship were all sent headlong into the sea, while those Guilda men on _The Delight_ were more than a little distracted.

“Yes! That’s how you use that spell. From now on, you use it like that!” Burke cried.

One of the enemy sailors who was coming at Harry stopped dead in shock before glaring at him. “Filho da puta!”

Granted, the Uruguayan prostitutes didn’t know as much Portuguese, but Harry shrugged and gave it a go. “Vá mamar no jegue!” The man was too busy being infuriated to notice when Harry _Stupefied_ and bound him.

The cleanup wasn’t all that difficult. Half the crew got to work repairing the damage to _The Delight_ while the other half, Harry among them, made sure all the captured enemies were stunned and tied up. They unceremoniously dumped the men in long boats and dropped the boats into the sea. Their mates, still floundering in the water, would eventually swim over and waken them before starting the ignominious journey to Bermuda. Very few wizards could Apparate more than a hundred miles or so, so they’d have a long time to stew in their defeat.

Half an hour later, _The Delight_ made her dive, course laid for Whiddy Island.

_I’m going home_, Harry thought as they exchanged the golden daylight for the rich cerulean of the deep Atlantic.

_Aye, that you are, lad_, Ab’s voice whispered in the waves that now rocked above him.

_Yes, I think I can go home now. I’m ready._
On the Lapse into Colonialism

It wasn’t until a few days ago that I realized this chapter totally played into the colonialist bullshit of “white European male goes to non-European foreign places and misbehaves with/against various citizens of those places.” I seriously didn’t mean to do this, and I really apologize if I’ve offended anyone with my one-sided representations of Havana, Montevideo, and, by extension, Brazil. I chose the Caribbean and South America because of the pop culture association of pirates with the former, and my personal experience spending time with my partner’s stepdad’s family in Uruguay. All the places I represent are the seedier side of these areas only because I expect pirates would frequent the seedier sides of any city they visited.

And please note that I don’t condone many of Harry’s (and the pirates’) actions in this chapter and I’m not intending to valorize them.
29 July, 1978

The grounds around Hagrid’s hut were silent in the golden-blue light of the midsummer’s dawn. 

*It looks the same.*

Harry shook his head, exasperated with himself.

*Of course it looks the same. It’s only been two bloody months!*

Nonetheless, looking at Hogwarts made him feel like he’d been gone a good deal longer.

*Maybe I should come back in a few hours.*

They had made port at Whiddy Island while it was still quite dark. The others had headed into the nominal town for a very early breakfast and a bit of hair of the dog. Harry, however, had been itching to leave at once, though he was torn between anticipation and panic at the thought of home.

He had Apparated to just outside Hogsmeade, but his feet had carried him to Hagrid’s. He’s my godfather, he should be first to know I’m back, and that I’m okay.

But now he was hesitating to wake the half-giant.

With a little sigh he headed over towards the paddocks instead. A much larger Luke scampered over to him immediately, followed by a more sedate and almost scowling Leia.

Harry grinned and crouched down for a reunion filled with enthusiastic scratching. A bit later, Goat herself ambled over.


She ignored his wince and moved in again, but this time to simply nibble on his hair. “Yeah, I know. It’s crazy long now. I’ll have to cut it some, I suppose.”

Sitting with the goats, Harry realized with a pang how normal he felt. *It’s just like it was before, almost.*

*Except I’ll go home and Ab won’t be there.* He closed his eyes and leaned into Goat. She stank, but to Harry it was familiar. Comforting.

Eventually a new stench intruded. The young wizard looked up just in time to get nailed in the face with a great glob of drool.
Stimpy the boarhound barked and dropped a stick on top of him.

*Some things never change, I guess.*

When the sun had fully crested the horizon, Hagrid ambled out of his hut to find his godson tossing the stick for for his dog.

“‘Arry! Yer back early! Thought you weren’t due ‘til tomorrow or so. Ah, c’mere lad!”

Harry beamed and allowed the half-giant to fold him into a rib-cracking hug. “Hey Hagrid, yeah I just got in. We had a spot of trouble, so came back sooner.”

“Well now, let’s have a look at ye…” Hagrid nodded appreciatively. “Sprouted up pretty well there, I reckon. But yer hair…well, that’s yer choice, I s’pose.”

“Hey! I’ll get it cut!”

They laughed, entering the hut. Hagrid motioned for Harry to take a seat and started to busy himself making breakfast.

“No, you don’ need to be helpin’ me, ‘Arry. Ye’ve had a long journey, I’ll make it fer us both.” The large man delicately began cracking eggs and preparing rashers of bacon. “So, didja jus’ Apparate right on over then?”

“Yeah, we ported at Whiddy and I popped straight here…” Harry blinked.

Wait. “Er–”

Hagrid snorted. “I’m still not s’pposed to know yer a wizard, Harry, right?”

“Wha–oh, crap. Erm…” Shite. He must be furious.

“How long have you known?”

“Ah, don’ worry yerself. I get why ya didn’t tell me, though I’m hopin’ ye were plannin’ on it sometime.” When Harry nodded mutely, Hagrid smiled. “Prolly the right call not tellin’ me, I’m guessin’.”

Harry found his voice. “How long have you known?”

“Oh, just a month or so. Pel Pepst shared some a’ the letters Burke sent him, and I reckon he forgot I didn’t know.”

Harry sighed. “I really was going to tell you, Hagrid. No one but Pel and…and Ab knew for a long time. Myrtle Cramer found out by accident, but I hadn’t told anyone else until right before I left.”

The older man nodded as he stirred the eggs. “I told ya, I understand. Don’ be frettin’. And don’t ye worry about tellin’ me why you lied like that to everyone. Figure it must’a been fer something important, what wi’ the Ministry and yer trial and all. But ye can tell me, if you ever want to. Now,” he plopped a full plate of eggs, bacon, and very burnt toast in front of Harry, “eat up.”

*I didn’t realize how much I missed him.* “Thanks, Hagrid. That…that means a lot to me.” As he started enjoying his eggs, something else Hagrid said finally registered. “Wait–the Captain was writing to Pel?”

“Well a’ course he was! Not like we’re goin’ ta let ye bugger off ter some foreign island and not keep tabs, even if you don’t write enough!” He snorted at Harry’s incredulous look. “Burke wrote Pel every week, mind you.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed.
“T’was good ta hear that yer doin’ so well with magic an’ all,” Hagrid went on with a sterner face. “But as yer godfather, it don’ sit right with me that ye were thievin’, even if it was the sort that the Ministry likes.”

“Oh. Um. Sorry Hagrid. That was my least favorite part though…”

“And,” Hagrid spoke over him, “I don’t want to hear any more ‘bout you runnin’ through streets a’ Merlin-knows-where in naught but your skin, y’hear me? That’s jus’ not proper fer a young man.”

Harry flushed so deeply he became light-headed. “Oh… so you and Pel know about, um, that? Look, there’s a lot of er, circumstances…” Hagrid’s glare put an end to that attempt.

“Yeah, okay, no more running naked through foreign streets.”

Hagrid’s frown deepened.

“Through any streets, I mean.”

“Well all righ’ then.” The half-giant kept trying to scowl, but Harry could tell that the corners of the man’s mouth were twitching. Finally he burst out in laughter. “That must’a been a sight, though! Had me an’ Pel an’ the others in stitches!”

Oh God. ‘The others’?

“Others?”

Hagrid mopped at his face with his napkin. “Aye, Pel read that one aloud to me and Dalcop. Doc and Guin Dearborn too.”

I am never going to live this down.

And I’m going to murder Caffrey Burke.

xoxoxox

He took his time ambling down the familiar path towards the village. Although Hagrid had offered to accompany him, Harry knew he had to do this on his own.

The last time I walked this road to the pub, I found Ab and the others dead.

The thought lay on his mind like a blanket of dead leaves.

He wanted to stop, to turn back, to run away to Montevideo or Caracas or, fuck it, even Havana. He’d started from scratch already before, he could do it again, become another person somewhere else.

But Ab wanted the Head to be my home.

It is my home.

Harry kept his course.

I can’t let Barty-fucking-Crouch Junior rob me of anything else.
The familiar thatched roofs of Hogsmeade sprang into view. Down the hill, up the little crest, down again towards the main street that sprawled out in welcome. Harry took the left turn off onto Low Street, his heart in his throat.

_I won’t let anyone steal my home–Ab’s home–from me._

It hurt to turn his eyes forwards, to look up and see what he knew would stand before him.

He looked up.

But the first building he saw wasn’t the Head.

_Bugger me, they actually did it._

Harry laughed, a clear, surprising sound in the early morning silence.

The two-story building’s brown shingles gleamed as if newly polished, the displays twinkling like inlaid jewels. Inside he spied all manner of beautiful, fascinating, bloody _amazing_ timepieces set out to beguile the passerby. It was a tasteful, breathtaking building.

The large sign above the door proclaimed it _Prewetts’ Prodigious Clocks._

Harry grinned. _I love it._

The clock tower that surmounted the building suddenly rang out seven o’clock. For each note, a little silver bird appeared in a puff of golden smoke and flew down to the ground looking for breakfast. The last sat on Harry’s head for several moments before all of them disappeared in little showers of sparkles.

His smile melted away as he finally turned his eyes to the Head.

It looked exactly the same.

_Deep breath._

He crossed the street to head around the back. The wards that crackled around the stable door allowed him entry, and then he was in his old bedroom again. Most of the goats were still slumbering or else lazily munching straw. Someone had put out clean sheets for him.

“Hi everyone,” Harry murmured to the goats, dropping his bag on the straw bed. “I’m home.”

_xoxoxoxox_

A woman was singing in the kitchen as Harry approached, his mind set on finally confronting the pub.

Guin Dearborn nearly had a heart attack when he poked his head in. “_Ar hyrd y nos, O mor–AAAH!_” (*)

“Oh–Oh, Harry! You scared the life out of me!” Harry made to apologize–her scream had actually startled him in return–but she waved him quiet as she rushed on. “I’m sorry, I’ve just gotten used to being alone for hours in the morning while I bake. I’m so happy to see you!”

Harry blinked in surprise when she wrapped him a hug that nearly put Hagrid’s to shame.

“Oh, you’re early! Did you just get in? Have you seen Hagrid? If you haven’t, you really should!
Are you hungry? How are you? Oh no, your hair…”

The onslaught of questions left Harry speechless for a moment. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve just come from his hut, got in a few hours ago. He made breakfast.”

Guin grinned. “I’m sorry, Harry. It’s just good to see you. Look how tanned you’ve gotten! Why don’t you head upstairs and I’ll bring you one of my new–”

The sizzling of a sudden spell zooming towards him had Harry turned, shielded, and casting back without a moment’s thought.

A beat or two later and an unconscious Doc Dearborn tumbled down the stairs from the pub door above.

“Holy shit!”

“Oh dear…” Guin remarked in shock, “he must have heard me scream, woken up, and not recognized you. Oh, that hair Harry…”

Harry winced—he wasn’t sure if it was in sympathy with Doc, who’d definitely feel those bruises, or because of the ongoing commentary about his hair. “Here, let me tie him up and then I’ll wake him.”

Guin’s jaw dropped.

“I have to tie him up, Guin, else he might try to fight again when he wakes. Once he realises it’s me I’ll let him go.”

The dark-haired woman nodded, her eyes beginning to twinkle. “Looks like you learned a fair bit on that boat.”

He smiled back. “Gotta call vessels like that ‘ships’, Guin. Incarcerous, Renervate!”

Doc surged awake glaring daggers. “Leave my wife alone or I’ll–”

“Hey Doc, good to see you. Calm down and I’ll let you go, yeah?”

The big one-armed man squinted. “Oh. That you Harry? Er…sorry about that, mate. Thought you were someone going after Guin.”

“Finite Incantatem. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry about the fall.”

“Though I do appreciate your bravery and chivalry, my love,” Guin remarked. “But maybe next time you should think a tad more about your tactics.”

Doc stood up wincing and ignored his wife’s barb. “Good to see you, kid. But if you two don’t mind, I’m for bed again. Late night.” At their nods he trudged back up the stairs.

Guin shook her head, her smile exasperated. “Gryffindors. Doc always jumps in without thinking.”

Sounds about right. “Wait, so you weren’t a Gryffindor? I guess I just assumed that since you were fighting last year and you handled yourself so well at the Head–”

“And only Gryffindors can fight and wrangle drunken louts?” Guin asked archly. “Ridiculous notion, that. At any rate, I’m Slytherin, of course!”

Harry gaped. “Seriously?”
“You didn’t notice? Well,” the woman looked quite satisfied with herself, “guess I’m still an exceptional Slytherin then. The only ones who get pegged easily are the rubbish ones who go around boasting that blood purity hogwash.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. A one-armed Gryffindor warrior married to a Slytherin who spends her day baking. That’s brilliant.

“At any rate, sorry for that little attack. Things have been awfully tense around the village for awhile what with–well, you’ll find out. The war escalated a fair bit while you were away. You go on to the pub. I’ll bring some pastries and a pot of tea, and we can catch up.”

Harry tried to smile at Guin, but his stomach was in knots over going to the public room. The woman seemed to understand and put an encouraging hand on his shoulder. “Terrible things happened there, I know. But so did wonderful things. Don’t let the one ruin the other for you, if you can.”

He nodded, thinking of Christmas at the Head, of the day he returned after his trial, and made his way up the stairs.

I won’t let Crouch steal my home from me.

xoxoxoxo

I was expecting that to be worse, Harry concluded as he slowly climbed to the upper floor of the Head. The public room had looked exactly as he’d remembered it, and after he some time catching up with Guin, he didn’t see the bodies every time he looked around.

“Grieving can take so much longer than you expect it to,” Guin had observed. “The past, it’s always there, waiting, I suppose. It might be ten, twenty, fifty years from now, and one day you’ll walk in and see them just as if it were yesterday. But it will get better, I promise you.”

Harry sighed. Now, however, wasn’t the time for grieving.

Now was the time for groveling.

“You should take a nap,” Guin had said. “But before that, you should march that little arse of yours upstairs and talk to Ariana. She was absolutely distraught by Ab’s death and your departure. It took me weeks of coaxing to get her to stop hiding behind things. You never even told her goodbye, you know.”

Yes, now was the time for groveling.

He entered the Yellow Room and approached the mirror. “Ariana? Ariana can you hear me? It’s, um, it’s me. Harry. Would you…would you come to the mirror?”

The girl appeared so suddenly that Harry stepped back in alarm. Oh. Oh shit.

The scowl that Ariana aimed at him felt like it was searing his skin. On instinct he ducked as she threw her book of fairy tales at the mirror’s surface, though it didn’t break through into reality.

“Oh, hi Ariana. Um…”

She threw up her hands in disgust and flopped down at the writing desk. Four sheets of parchment later—she had stabbed through the first three with her quill as she wrote—and she finally stood, holding the note up.
It took him a few minutes to accustom himself to reading mirror-writing again, and her furious scrawl wasn’t helping matters, but he finally managed to decipher it.

_How could you just LEAVE me here like that? How? People I didn’t know had to tell me about my BROTHER! I thought we were friends! You AREN’T a nice person!_

Painted tears coursed down her face.

_‘You aren’t a nice person.’ Jesus. He’d never felt like such a bastard. He sat down heavily on the bed._

_“I’m sorry, Ariana.”_

She scoffed.

_“No, really, I am so sorry. See, you…you know how Ab died, yeah?” When she gave a jerky nod, he went on. “I found him here. And I don’t have a good excuse for you…I just…just couldn’t stop thinking about it. I couldn’t bear coming back. All I could see was him.” Harry gazed down at this hands. “So I left. I never meant to stay away forever. I just needed to not be here for a little while. I really am sorry…I understand if you don’t want to talk to me anymore. Or for a while. Or whatever._

He finally looked back up at her. She seemed to have calmed a bit and was staring hard at him. After several moments she shook her head and went back to the desk.

_The writing on this parchment was far more legible._

_Ab was right. You really are a fool sometimes._

_I forgive you._

_BUT NEVER DO THAT AGAIN!_

Harry smiled. “I won’t. I promise.”

Ariana huffed and scrawled a bit more.

_You better have brought me a present._

_A NICE ONE!_

He grinned and raced down to get it from his bag in the stable. With a flourish he brought the book, richly-bound in crimson leather and edged in silver leaf, close to the mirror so she could read the title for herself. _A Treasury of Central and South American Folktales._

The girl tried to keep from clapping her hands and jumping—she was dead set on being furious, after all—but failed miserably. Harry chuckled as he settled onto the bed to read to her.

_xoxoxox_

31 July, 1978

Ab was wiping down the bar top while Harry thumbed through the _Prophet._

_“Looks like things got way worse while I was away,” Harry mused. “Two assassinations of Wizengamot members, and they found three different spies in the Ministry.” He huffed. “Honestly, why Voldemort would need someone in the Gobstones Club office is beyond me.”_

Ab snorted.
“Actually, why there’s an office for the Gobstones Club in the Ministry at all is beyond me.” Harry folded up the paper. “I went out into the village yesterday. It was… really weird.”

“Why’s that, lad?”

“Well, some bloke from the other side of the village was one of those Ministry spies. People are really starting to get spooked that it’s their neighbors on the other side. Hell, they gave Cordwaine the full fifteen year sentence for trying to poison us. I don’t think that would have happened six months ago.” Harry sighed. “Everybody just seems scared of each other.”

Ab sighed. “Aye. It’ll probably get worse before it gets better. Make no mistake, this ain’t evil or a Dark Lord we’re rallyin’ against. It’s a civil war.”

Harry nodded slowly. “That’s— I’ve never thought of it like that before. But I think it’s right. We’re going to be fighting against ourselves, aren’t we?” The enormity of the war stretching before him settled on his shoulders like an iron cloak. “Christ.”

The old publican hummed. “Head’s lookin’ good.”

“Yeah, Guin is kind of mental about keeping it clean,” Harry said with a smile. “Doc told me she’s one step away from following after Yarda with a spray bottle.

“Aye, I like that lass. She’s a good ‘un to keep around.”

Harry’s smile faded. “Yeah, I guess. I like them, but... It’s just, I don’t know them, y’know? Not really.”

“One day at a time, lad. Givin’ them a chance is good, but changes also need time.”

They fell into a companionable silence as Ab continued to wipe the same spot and Harry sipped a bottomless mug of tea.

“Today’s my birthday. And the will reading.” Ab looked up. “Thanks a lot for making that be on my birthday, by the way, you old fart.”

“Ah, shut it. You’re getting a bloody pub and inn for your majority, I don’t want to hear any whinin’ outta you!” Ab spat the words without any venom.

Harry slowly realised that the distance between him and Ab had grown. They hadn’t changed positions, but now it seemed like Ab was speaking with him from across the length of a ballroom.

“But I don’t want a pub. I want you back.”

The space between them stretched further.

“This isn’t real, is it Ab? It’s a dream again,” Harry shouted to the man who still hadn’t stopped wiping the bar top even as he faded into a pin prick on the horizon.

“Course it’s a dream, you ruddy fool. I’ve been in the ground for three months already,” Ab’s voice whispered back. “But it can still be real enough. Ain’t that right, lad?”

The stable was cold when Harry jolted awake. With dry eyes he stared into the darkness, listening to the goats breathe. It was a long time before he finally closed them again.

xoxoxox
Later that morning he tugged on the navy robes that Caff Burke had gifted him, ("Seriously, you need to own a set of clothing that isn’t from the Jumble. Have some self-respect, love.") and gave himself a critical once-over in the mirror.

_Guin_ had the other day and threatened to petrify him unless he sat still enough for her to “repair him.” Honestly, it’s not like I wanted it that long anyway!

Thankfully the woman had a deft hand for such things, and his shorter hairstyle actually looked rather nice.

*And most importantly,* he grinned, _I look older. At least eighteen._

_Well, maybe._

He found Pel, Guin, and Doc taking tea at the front table.

“Morning Harry,” Pel grinned. “Glad to see that your remembered to put on some trousers.”

_I hate Caffrey Burke._

“You know, that joke was only funny the first dozen times you used it,” Harry deadpanned. The old solicitor had gleefully made certain that anyone at the Head who hadn’t already known about Harry’s naked run through Havana’s streets had been brought up to date.

_Thank God Caff didn’t tell them exactly why I was running._ His heart stuttered. _Unless Pel’s just saving that for a special occasion. Dammit Caff._

Conversation over breakfast was kept light. The three older adults (’Cause I’m an adult now too, Harry preened) seemed to be carefully avoiding serious topics.

“Well, Harry, you and I are due at the DMLE to sign your parole release papers, so we should get going. You two be ready to go the reading when we get back.”

Harry held back a groan. He wasn’t looking forward to the necessary trip to the DMLE any more than he was Ab’s will reading.

A moment later and he had called out the address and disappeared with Pel in a rush of green flames.

_xoxoxox_

The pair returned a few hours later. The actual release from parole had been simple— signing a few forms— but the Aurors had taken special delight in flouting their authority and delaying the process.

“Okay people, we aren’t late yet, but let’s get moving,” Pel ordered with a clap. As he didn’t have his own solicitor’s office, they were renting one of the official rooms at the Hogsmeade Post Office.

As they made their way down High Street, Harry began to fret. He’d never been to a will reading, and probably should have asked Pel what was expected of him. _Who else will be there? Will there be issues with coming out as a wizard? Pel swore that there’s no law against it but—_

A strong hand on his shoulders caused him to start. “Easy there, mate,” Doc rumbled. “Everything’ll be fine. You keep biting that lip and it’ll be bleeding soon.”

Harry gave him a jerky nod. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

The others greeted old Strix Reuters, who ran the Post Office, as they filed into the long, narrow
“Gotcher room all ready for ya, Pel,” the little man chirped as he lead them up a staircase. “Yer the first t’ arrive, but I’ll be sure ta send the others on up.”

Harry’s eyes widened as he entered. Compared to the rather dilapidated state of the reception hall, the meeting room was opulent, with thick crimson carpet and tasteful silk wallpaper. A number of leather armchairs were scattered about, all facing a stately oak desk.

“And me without my dress robes,” Doc murmured.

Harry noticed Guin straightening her work clothes self-consciously.

Pel just flopped down in the chair behind the desk. “Oh, bugger that. It’s just us an’ a few others.” He began rifling around in his bag. “Harry, you got your OWL results, right? We may need ‘em.”

He patted his inside pocket. “All set.”

They didn’t have to wait long for the rest to arrive. Harry was on the edge of his seat, wondering who else had been invited.

When Albus Dumbledore walked in wearing sedate plum velvet robes, Harry chastised himself for not having expected him. *He’s Ab’s brother. Of course he’s here.*

Dumbledore smiled cordially at Pel, Guin, and Doc, then turned to Harry. “It’s good to see you again, Harry,” he murmured.

“And you, sir. Though I wish things were…”

“Yes. I wish we could meet under happier circumstances as well.”

Two more men in business robes, one old and the other quite young, arrived.

“Greetings,” the elder said in a thin, wheezing voice. “I am Audrey Bruach, representing the Ministry of Magic, Proper Inheritance Services. With me is our intern Preston Pursproud,” the younger man puffed out his chest. “We are here in our official capacity to ensure proper adherence to Ministry guidelines during today’s transaction.”

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Bruach,” Pel acknowledged in his ‘proper solicitor voice.’ “As all relevant parties are now in attendance, we may begin.” He cleared his throat impressively. “We are here today to execute the last will and testament of Aberforth Gaius Dumbledore, deceased as of the first of May, 1978.” He pulled out a thick sheet of parchment.

Harry sat very still. The way Pel spoke…it just sounded so absolute. Final.

“I, Aberforth Gaius Dumbledore, presently of Hogsmeade, Scotland, hereby revoke any testamentary dispositions…”

*Ab’s really, really gone.*

Hippia George got something, and so did the Headmaster. Then Pel was sending him a significant look that told him to pay attention.

“I hereby direct that the entirety of my remaining estate, including but not limited to the Hog’s Head Pub and Inn and all the remaining contents of Gringotts vault 517, be bequeathed to my charge, Mr. Harry J. Aberforth, upon his ascension to his majority. Should this will be executed prior to the
thirty-first July 1978, then I hereby direct that the entirety of my remaining estate be placed in trust under the name Harry J. Aberforth, to be administered by Caradoc Dearborn and Guinier Dearborn until such time as Mr. Aberforth achieves his majority.”

Pel watched Harry, his eyes solemn.

“So I affirm with my signature below. Aberforth Dumbledore.”

After a beat the headmaster coughed delicately. The Ministry official was rifling through his files.

Here it comes.

“Thank you, Mr. Pepst. I truly do not wish to contest my brother’s will, but I’m afraid I must point out that Mr. Harry, ah, Aberforth, is ineligible under British wizarding law to inherit any Hogsmeade properties.”

Harry glanced at Dumbledore. He really did look apologetic. He isn’t a bad man. I need to remember that.

“Indeed,” the headmaster was continuing, “I expected that his custodianship would be transferred to me today, as I did not realize it was his seventeenth birthday.” He paused. “Happy birthday by the way, Harry.”

“Thank you sir, but—” How do I say this?

“Absolute tosh, this is!” The young official—Preston Pur-something—burst out. “We’ll have to invalidate the entire will of course, and transfer the bulk of the estate to the Ministry. Imagine that! Trying to leave property to a squib!”

Pel nodded graciously. “Of course, it is illegal for squibs to receive such bequests. Mr. Aberforth, do you have any evidence to support your claim?”

Might as well have fun with this.

With a twist of his wrist and his holly wand slipped into his palm. Raising his hand—Preston Whatever’s eyes were saucers—he gave it a tiny flick and thought, Avis. The small flock of gulls circled the room and landed on the young man. Harry was quite proud he didn’t grin when a more enterprising bird’s droppings elicited a pathetic “meep!”

“I’m not a squib.”

While Dumbledore and the younger Ministry official stared at his simple pronouncement, Pel continued on smoothly. “Yes, that appears to be the case. Given that, it seems—”

“But he’s a squib!” Preston Whatever shouted, upsetting the bird perched on his golden hair.

“Mr. Aberforth,” Dumbledore cut in, a curl of humor in his tone, “can you perhaps further substantiate your claim?”

He’s on my side.

“Er, sure sir…” He thought hard and recalled a spell he’d read about in Tweeney Twig’s Guide. Harry had never seen much use for it but it was easily cast and modified. “Togatus Capris!”

The headmaster laughed heartily as his plum robes suddenly boasted a pattern of gamboling goats. “Well done, Harry!”
“Thanks, sir. Oh! I also have my OWL certifications here, if that helps.”

He would forever deny the deep surge of satisfaction that crested in him at Preston Whatever’s and Dumbledore’s faces as he handed over his results.

“Ah, well done, Mr. Aberforth,” Dumbledore had recovered enough to beam at him.

*Wait—he didn’t know. He really didn’t know.*

*That means Alice didn’t tell him. She could have, but she didn’t.*

Sudden warmth filled him.

“May I please see the document?” the elder Ministry representative asked.

Harry watched in growing relief as the man nodded, making some notes on his own parchments.

“Yes, this seems to be in order.”

“But, but he’s a *squib,*” Preston insisted, “he was even on trial last year!”

Harry shrugged. “There’s no law against claiming to be a squib.”

“But, but…” Poor Preston seemed to be taking the news hard.

“You are correct young man,” the elder Ministry man agreed blandly.

Pel cleared his throat. “Well, it seems this will reading is now concluded. Mr. Dumbledore, the items bequeathed to you will be delivered later today, if that is amenable.”

The elder Ministry official started herding his still-sputtering intern from the room.

“Mr….Aberforth,” Dumbledore said, his eyes running over him with unmasked curiosity, “I realize you will be quite busy in the near future, but would you agree to a conversation about today’s revelations?”

Harry wasn’t surprised. “Sure, sir. Just stop by the Head whenever.”

When the door closed Harry turned to find Guin, Doc, and Pel all smiling at him.

“Congratulations to the newest pub owner in wizarding Britain!” Guin exclaimed.

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“Are you sure you don’t want to take a nap Harry? You look really, really knackered,” Doc asked for the fifth time since they returned to the Head.

He was feeling run-down. *It’s probably the weather; damn if Britain isn’t even colder and grayer after South America.*

*But Doc is about as subtle as a brick. I know what you’re trying to do!*

Of course, he should go sleep. He’d feel better. More importantly, poor Doc wouldn’t be so anxious, and Guin would stop looking anxious about Doc’s being anxious.

*Fine. It is really good of them, after all. I’m just not exactly in the mood after today.* Harry heaved a rather dramatic sigh. “I guess you’re right. I’ll help out at the bar later, okay?”
“Sure, kid, sure! Thanks! Take as long as you need!” The brawny man was fairly bouncing.

Yeah, okay. You’ll have plenty of time to set up my surprise party.

Guin seemed to read his mind and narrowed her eyes.

Harry scampered down to the stable.

xoxoxox

By nine Harry couldn’t possibly pretend to still be sleeping, given the volume of the bar room above him.

With a final pat for Goat and Luke, and a glare from Leia (who just glared at him), Harry pulled on his good robes again and headed up, schooling his features so that he would look properly surprised.

When he entered the pub, however, he didn’t need to act much.

“SURPRISE!” dozens of voices called out.

Holy shite, there are a lot of people here!

Everywhere he looked there was someone he knew. I can’t believe I know this many people.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” Pell called. “He’s here, everybody–now it’s a party!”

The night was a whirlwind of conversation and carousing. Everyone wanted to wish Harry well on his majority, and for some that apparently meant ever more boisterous and increasingly handsy flirtation.

“Thanks, Sanguini, but I’m, uh, not really interested…”

“Oh! Mindy! That’s well, awfully um, nice of you but…”

“Er…Professor Pemphredo?”

“Dammit, I don’t even know you!”

“Oi!” Myrtle Cramer’s voice teased over the din. “Get that stick outta your arse, Harry! Everyone’s been so patient waiting for you to reach your majority, after all!”

“Tell us about Havana, Harry!” another voice called.

“Why don’t you re-enact it for us!” a third chimed in.

“HEY NOW!” A sudden hush fell as an intoxicated Hagrid stood up, eyes flashing. “Now I’m ‘Arry’s godfather, ye know. An’ I’m tellin’ all a’ you right here an’ now ta shut yer gobs!”

Thank you Hagrid.

“Ye just can’t expect the lad to embarrass himself like that right from the off,” the half-giant continued, “gotta wait until he’s ruddy good and drunk! To Harry!” Hagrid raised his pint high and toasted Harry before falling on his arse, taking a nearby table down with him.

“HARRY!” The pub echoed through their laughter.
Harry shook his head and took a long draw of his own stout. *To me, then, I guess.*

By midnight the party was still in full swing, though Harry had been extremely careful to make sure that he didn’t drink much. *There’s no way I’m going to be vulnerable in front of this bloody handsy crowd!*

When he felt a hand on his shoulder he turned to rebuff the unwanted groper only to find a grinning Pel. “C’mon to the kitchen for a mo’, m’friend. Gotta give ye yer present an’ iss too loud ou’ here.”

*Good Lord, I think I’m going to have to carry him back up the stairs at this rate.*

Harry dutifully followed to where Guin, Doc, Myrtle, Dalcop and, surprisingly, the Prewett brothers were waiting for them.

“Could you wake Hagrid?” Guin asked.

Fabian Prewett shook his head. “Nope, bloke’s out cold in the back.”

“Well, I know he’d hate to miss this, but we can’t wait on him to sleep it off,” Doc frowned. “Ah well, Harry,” he smiled, “it was, well, it was Ab’s idea really, but he…I mean we…oh, I’ve buggered it…”

“I kin do i…” Pel slurred.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Myrtle rolled her eyes, “Harry, it’s tradition that children get a watch from their family when they reach their majority. Ab was, of course, going to get you one, and he’d already talked with the Prewetts here. We all chipped in.” Fabian handed her an elegant ribbon-tied box. “So, happy birthday, Harry dear.”

His grin spread slowly across his face.

Nestled inside was an exquisite watch with a face of silvery blue, the band a finely woven leather.

“Oh …” he breathed.

“Turn it over, turn it over,” Fabian urged.

*There is a time for everything.*

Harry blinked.

“Aberforth did tell us he wanted this particular inscription,” Gideon said quietly.

*A time for everything*… He smiled. *Oh, Ab.*

“Thank you,” he choked “All of you…” Harry looked at Fabian, and then at Gideon. “I’ve never had anything like this before.”

“C’mon, lad, try ‘er on, then,” Pel urged.

He grinned and slipped the watch onto his left wrist. The band immediately sized to fit.

“There are a few other minor charms on it,” Fabian noted. “Come by the shop soon, yeah?”

“Oh no, we should get back,” Guin said, suddenly nervous. “No one is watching the pub!”
A timely crash punctuated the end of her statement.

They all hurried out.

He nearly doubled over in laughter when, the moment Guin rushed into the public room, most everyone snapped to attention and assumed their most innocent faces.

*Damn, Guin must have put in some serious time scaring the crap out of everyone,* Harry thought with no little admiration.

The party continued without further drama for a while, long after Guin had retired and Doc had taken over policing the pub. A small scuffle saw two men levitated out. Doc took care to knock their heads together a few times as he followed their floating bodies out of the door.

“I s’id, scum like you don’ belong ‘ere,” a man barked out.

Harry whipped around. Yarda Gobermouch was hanging on the arm of a man he vaguely recognized, one of her regular clients. The man was getting dangerously close to one member of Loch’s group of werewolves.

*Shite.*

“Hey, back off, we aren’t bothering you!”

“Don’t you yell at him, werewolf!” Yarda screeched.

The drunken john smirked and started fumbling for his wand. “Yeah, ye can’t talk to a wizard like that, you fuckin’ piece a’ trash. Ye bleeding *animal.*”

As the man raised his wand, Harry was already moving.

He didn’t even think. He wasn’t going to put up with this shit.

*Ab wouldn’t put up with this shit.*

“*Flagellum Ignis!*” The Fire Whip’s thread arced through the pub, just missing several other patrons, and wrapped itself around the john’s brandished wand. With a deft flick of his wrist, the smoking wood was flying through the air only to be caught in Harry’s left hand.

*Thank you, Red Nora.* She had made him practice until he never wanted to say the incantation again, but she had been determined that he learn to manipulate its direction, diameter, and the heat of its fire so that it became second nature.

With a jerk of his wand the spell fizzled out, leaving everyone to watch the wisps of smoke clinging to the air.

“Not in my pub,” he said, his voice hard and firm. “Get out of here, you can come back tomorrow and pick up your wand. Loch, you and your friends can stay.” The pub had gone absolutely silent but for some breathy little giggles from Myrtle. “Got it?”

No one moved.

Mouths gaped.

*Oh.*
Oh yeah... Most of them don’t know I’m a wizard yet.

He sighed.

Oops.

“Your pub?” Yarda finally shrieked into the deafening silence. “Your pub?!”

Harry leaned back against the bar. “Yeah. My pub.”

“But you’re a squib!” someone shouted from the back. “You can’t have the pub, Harry!”

Myrtle snorted. “Am I the only here who saw the Fire Whip?”

“I’m not a squib,” Harry shrugged. He could feel the shock settling around the room and allowed himself to relish having surprised the hell out of everyone. “Guess you could say I’m just a liar. But you better believe this is my pub. Don’t act like idiots, and we won’t have a problem.” He fingered his wand the way Caff Burke did when he wanted to seem threatening.

Myrtle was laughing out loud now, and Dalcop joined in.

Gideon Prewett’s eyes sparkled as Fabian shook his head and muttered, “well holy fuck....” Both the pack of werewolves and the group of vampires were starting to grin. Yarda was still seething.

“So,” Harry continued, doing his best to keep his tone even, “any other questions?”

As dozens of voices rose in an excited clamor to pester him with increasingly personal questions, he realized that had definitely been the wrong thing to say.

xoxoxox

2 August, 1978

Two years to the day since Harry had been Kissed he found himself walking up the familiar path to Hogwarts’ great entrance gates.

He was a man on a mission.

Well, two missions actually.

The wrought-iron gate, however, was refusing to open at his approach.

Shite, do I knock or something?

He looked around.

Er, how do I knock?

“Well? Whaddaya want, then?”

Harry blinked up at one of the winged boar statues that flanked the gate. It was leaning forward and sniffing at him curiously.

“You...talk?”

The boar snorted. “Wouldn’t be good at my job if I couldn’t. But don’t wake Lou over there. He never shuts up.”
“Oh. Okay. Um, can I come in please?”

Another snort. “Why?”

“I’d really like to talk with Madame Pomfrey. I went overseas and I’ve brought her a present. I was also hoping to speak with Argus Filch. I have something for him, too.” He awkwardly held up the heavy money bag for the boar to inspect.

Harry had been shocked the day before when Pel, still recovering from his celebration of Harry’s birthday, had staggered over and plopped the bag of Galleons in front of him.

“Wow, thanks Pel! Another birthday present for me?”

Pel had mock-glared at the younger wizard. “Nah. But I figured since you know Filch some you can drop it off for him.” At Harry’s confusion, Pel had continued on. “Forgot you missed it, off being naked in strange places. Filch won the pot on the Defense Professor’s Demise.”

“What? Oh, is Dorbel dead then?” Don’t sound so happy, he had chided himself. At least not where people can hear.

Pel had huffed. “Oh, he’s done at Hogwarts, but not dead. Got some posh job teaching Aurors instead.”

What?! Seriously?

The world is so unfair.

“That’s exactly what Filch bet on, pretty good odds too,” Pel shrugged. “This is his payout. You can bring it to him when you go see that nurse friend of yours.”

It was at this point that Harry had realised he’d completely forgotten to let Poppy know he had returned, and then that he had only written two short notes to her while he was at sea. Oh, she’s going to be furious. It looked like another round of groveling was in Harry’s near future.

The great boar sniffed at the bag, seeming impressed. “Sure, kid. They’re both in, so have at it. Don’t make a mess, don’t start shit. Got that?”

Amused, Harry nodded.

I wonder if they mention those rules in Hogwarts, A History…

xoxoxox

Poppy Pomfrey had been quite cranky with Harry, but his gift of several colorful scarves seemed to go a long way in proving his contrition.

Her forgiveness, however, did not mean that she could return his easy access to Hogwarts.

“I would love to have you come and help me few days a week, Harry, but you’re of age,” she explained. “Unfortunately, the rules on this are clear. Adults who have no official reason to be at the school are barred from regular entry. Granted, I’m sure I can get permission for you to visit sometimes, but beyond that, it’s simply against the rules.”

Harry found himself rather hurt that he couldn’t just walk into Hogwarts anymore.

After promising her lunch in a few day’s time, he departed for Filch’s office, his mind churning with
new worries. If I had known this would happen, I would’ve waited to visit Poppy and Argus until I had a plan. There’s a bloody basilisk in the basement! Now I’ll have to cobble together some reason to wander to the girls’ loo alone. Shite.

Filch’s barked “Enter!” brought an end to his fretting. Instead, as he watched the caretaker’s face morph into a deep, suspicious scowl, Harry realized he had other things to worry about.

“Hi Argus.” Why is he glaring at me?

“Hi Argus.” Why is he glaring at me? “I just got back, uh, from a job elsewhere, and found out that you won the wager on Dorbel. I just wanted to drop off your winnings.” He smiled hesitantly as the bag clinked on Filch’s overflowing desk.

“Got it. Now get out.”

“Argus? What—what’s wrong?”

Merlin, the man looks like he wants to attack me.

“Nothing, you worthless, lying piece of shit. Now, I said get out.”

Lying? Wait—

“Argus, I—”

The caretaker slammed his fists down, sending several parchments toppling. “Came to your party, Harry. Nice spells you got there.”

Oh. Oh shit, he knows. And…and Christ, I think he’s hurt.

“I, shit, Argus. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to tell you. I couldn’t tell anyone until I was of age, see, and—”

“Oh, I see. Bet you and your friends had a right laugh at making the world think you were just some useless little squib.”

“No! And what friends are you even talking about?” Harry threw up his hands helplessly. “No, it wasn’t some big joke, how could you think that? Yeah, I lied, but you have understand. I had to!”

The older man scowled more fiercely but Harry could tell he had at least caught his interest.

“Look, do you think anyone would go on trial, take a punishment, any of that, if they could have told the truth at any time and gotten out of trouble? Fuck no! The only reason they would is if they were more afraid of what would happen if I did tell the truth. Christ, Argus, this wasn’t some joke to me!”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room

“Fine then. I know you ain’t a bad sort,” Argus finally admitted grudgingly. “Just thought, well, that you and I were alike some. That’s all. And I don’t like people pretending they know what it’s like to be a squib. Bloody insulting, that is.”

Harry took the lack of yelling as tacit permission that he could sit. Indeed, though Filch was still glaring he didn’t tell him to leave again.

I have to make him understand.

The words came without him really thinking about them. “I think…I think maybe we probably are alike some, beyond just getting a shit deal from the Ministry, Argus,” he started thoughtfully. “You
know, I didn’t know I was a wizard until I was eleven. I’d never even heard of magic, real magic at least.”

Filch opened his mouth.

“No, I’m not Muggleborn. But my parents…well, I had to be raised by someone else. So I got stuck with some Muggle relatives. They…they hated even the idea of magic. Sure, they knew about it, but they never told me.”

*God, how long has it been since I thought about the Dursleys?*

“They didn’t, well, they didn’t like me much. Whatever I did was always wrong, I was always worthless and stupid, and no matter how much I tried, I knew that I could never be what they wanted. And I didn’t know why. Anyway…they treated me pretty badly. Hell, I spent ten years sleeping in the cupboard under the stairs.”

Filch’s eyes widened, but Harry was too lost in his own memories to notice.

“Y’know, I think this is the first time I’ve told anyone that, other than a mute portrait. Not even Ab.” The young man furrowed his brow and stared into space. “Huh… Pretty embarrassing, I guess. And it always hurt, I think, the thought of telling people just how much they hated me. Best I could hope for is that the people I’d tell would pity me.” Harry’s lips curled on the word. “I never wanted pity. I just wanted… a chance to be as good as everyone else. But because of what I was—not that I knew it—they’d never give that to me.”

Harry finally looked over at the caretaker, who was watching him intently.

“So yeah, I’m not a squib. But I really think that I kind of understand how it feels to be one. I’ve been treated like shit because of that lie for two years now, but I was treated like shit for just being what I was for a whole bloody decade before that.”

He sighed.

“Look, I swear I never meant to insult or hurt anyone. When Ab found me, he thought I was a squib because I wasn’t at Hogwarts and I just…went with it. I needed to hide, see, I couldn’t let anyone find me, and I figured no one would really notice me much if they thought I was a squib. I’m…I’m really sorry I hurt you.”

Filch continued to stare at him for several long moments before finally standing and shuffling over to one of his filing cabinets. He rummaged around in it and withdrew a bottle of Muggle scotch and two tumblers. After pouring a neat two fingers into each glass, he wordlessly handed one over.

They drank together in silence.

“Apology accepted,” Filch grunted several minutes later.

Harry nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching into a melancholy smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re all right now, then?”

“Yeah. Yeah, things are okay. I had to come out to the Ministry at the will reading. He wanted me to have the Head, and there’s that stupid law against squibs owning property.”

Filch grunted. “Aye…. So, you were always a wizard then? I guess I had hoped that maybe you had found something to help while you were in South America or whatnot.”
As the man trailed off, Harry noticed he was fingering an envelope on his desk marked with the logo for something called **Kray-Z-Korz!** A tagline below it proclaimed **The astonishing answer for the magically maladroit: expand your magical core!**

What kind of rubbish is this?

The memory of a similar letter on Filch’s desk sometime in his first or second year hazily formed in Harry’s mind. *Oh God. I think he hoped that I’d found some miracle cure to being a squib. Dammit.*

“Yeah, Argus, I’ve always been a wizard. There wasn’t something that gave me magic. I’m really sorry.”

“Ah, no matter,” he said, but his shoulders had slumped just that much farther.

Another memory flashed before him, Pel suggesting Filch hadn’t left after his enforced servitude sentence because the man had nowhere else to go.

“Look, this is a lot of money. It should really help you. But when your stupid service at Hogwarts is finally up, I hope you take it and leave this place. You…” Harry took a deep breath, “Argus, you deserve a lot better than to have to live in a place that makes you hate everything. Spend too long here, and I’m scared it’ll make you hateful. When you can leave here, just know that you’ll always have a bed free of charge at the Head. And if you need a job, well, it’s not glamorous, but I’ll pay you fair and I’ll treat you…I’ll treat you like a man, okay?”

Filch blinked and stared at the bag of Galleons and then at Harry. “Yeah, Harry. Yeah, I’ll remember that. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Just keep it in mind, okay? And of course, Mrs. Norris is also welcome.”

Finally, Argus Filch smiled.

“Say,” Harry said suddenly, “why *did* you bet that Dorbel would live and get a good job at the Ministry anyway?”

The older man shrugged. “’Cause the world is bloody unfair and shitstains who don’t deserve it tend to get ahead. Seemed the most reasonable outcome for the year, I guess.”

*Wish I could argue with that.* Harry swirled the last sip of his scotch. “Cheers, Argus.”

“Cheers, Harry.”

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Chapter End Notes

(*) The lyrics of the Welsh song Guin is singing are from the most popular version of the chorus to “Ar Hryd Y Nos” (“All Through the Night”), originally written in 1784 by Edward Jones.

Huge thanks to my awesome new beta AverageFish!
XXV. A Seat at the Grown-ups’ Table

5 August, 1978

The stable wards blared, dragging Harry out of a deep sleep. Before he even opened his eyes, he had shot a silent Incarcerous as he rolled into crouch behind the side of his hay-bed.

“Ah! Excellent reflexes, Harry!” Albus Dumbledore chirped from his position on the stable floor, tied up in a great knot of ropes.

“The fuck?”

He heard the faint sound of footsteps coming down the stairs from the kitchen. Without turning, Harry called out. “It’s okay, Guin, I’ve got this!”

The petite woman strode in, wand ready. “You do? The wards–Oh! Profess– Professor Dumbledore?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Dearborn.”

Guin looked between Harry and Dumbledore, her face carefully blank. “Well. Well, then, I suppose I’ll, uh...leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything, Harry.” The door closed, though Harry suspected she would be listening in behind it.

“Forgive my intrusion, Harry–”

“It’s fine, sir.” The younger wizard wiped the crusted sleep from his eyes. “It’s just really early.” He shook his head to wake himself up. “But I guess I did say stop by any time, didn’t I?”

The Headmaster looked contrite. “Again, my apologies. I was hoping to speak with you when we’d not be overheard.”

“No, it’s fine. Lemme just grab a pot of tea from the kitchen.”

“Ah, Harry?” Dumbledore coughed awkwardly. “While I could extricate myself, it would take far more flexibility than I’d prefer, at my age…”

Harry looked over and was torn between guilt and laughter. “Oh, sure, sorry.” He cast a silent Finite and headed up the stairs past Guin, who didn’t bother to pretend shame for her eavesdropping.
Five minutes later he returned with a tea service and some of Guin’s pastries.

Dumbledore sat on Goat’s bed and took a scone. “Congratulations on inheriting the Hog’s Head. I hope that everything is running smoothly.”

“I’d rather have Ab,” Harry shrugged, “but yeah, things are okay. It’s great having Doc and Guin here with me. When I set up the money stuff I’m going to sell them a third of the pub.”

“Ah yes, the Dearborns are a wonderful couple.” Both sipped quietly for a few minutes.

You wanted this conversation sir, you woke me up for it. You’re going to be the one that talks first. Even to himself it sounded petulant.

Finally, the Headmaster sighed. “I was very surprised to discover that you have magic.”

Harry nodded awkwardly.

Dumbledore frowned. “I assume my brother knew, given that he left you the pub….You do know that he and I took great pains to protect you during your trial last year. Why, why, Harry did you not simply alert the Wizengamot to the fact that you have magic?”

Fair question. And Dumbledore did help me. A lot.

“There are things I can’t talk about, sir. Ab knew, but we couldn’t tell. It was, well, really dangerous for me. More dangerous than the Wizengamot, at least until I reached my majority. So we lied. But I truly appreciate you helping me then. Granted, it wouldn’t have been necessary if we didn’t live in such a fucked, er, messed up society, but still.”

The headmaster looked at him in shock, and Harry suspected he wanted to protest that surely letting others know couldn’t have been worth his life.

He was impressed then, when Dumbledore said no such thing. Instead, the hurt was clear in his voice when he finally spoke. “I–I am surprised that Aberforth lied to me.” He shook his head. “No need to respond, Harry. Ours was not a relationship based upon mutual honesty.”

There was nothing to say to that.

The awkward moment stretched on. Dumbledore smiled tightly and changed the subject. “I suppose those at the Hog’s Head were surprised to learn the truth.”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it.”

In fact, his identity as a wizard had been the talk not only of the Head, but of all of Hogsmeade. It was easier to count who hadn’t been pressing him with questions and demands for explanations.

Rather than follow Ab’s advice and craft a believable lie, he had decided to adopt a strategy inspired by Dudley Dursley, of all people.

When they were young, his cousin had delighted in hiding things in his chubby hands and forcing Harry to guess what they were, in a voice that little Dudders deemed terribly mysterious. He would play along for a while, but Dudley would never, reveal what it was. Soon enough, Harry would lose interest, no matter how fascinated he had been initially.

Now, whenever someone would press Harry for details of his past, the young man would simply ask them what they thought his secret was.
It had led to a rather impressive variety of theories—that he was the son of a dark wizard, that he was the secret magical bastard of the Queen, that he had been injured in an epic battle and lost his memory, and so on. His favorite was the one that had him hiding from evil pirates.

Whatever the theory was, however outlandish it was, Harry would immediately confirm that it was correct.

His interlocutors would, as a rule, say something in response like “Really?” Harry would then fix them with his most disgusted Aberforth Dumbledore-style glare and snort.

Just like little Harry’s desire to know about Dudley’s treasures had waned, their interest in his past was quickly replaced with annoyance.

Sure, he’d irritated a good number of people, but Guin and Doc had gotten in on the act as well and were having a grand time with it.

*It’ll pass. It’s not like the wizarding world has a long attention span anyway. Pretty soon no one will really care.*

“Well,” Albus said crisply, bring Harry back to the present, “your OWL scores were excellent, especially given that you didn’t have a traditional education. One of the reasons I wished to speak with you, Harry, was to ask if you would be interested in coming to Hogwarts this year for your NEWTs.”

“What?” Harry choked out in shock. “Uh, thanks sir, really, but I don’t plan on taking them this year. Maybe eventually, I guess, but I already have a job, so…. And to be honest, I think I’ve been on my own for long enough now that I wouldn’t, uh, acclimate well to being treated like a child.”

Dumbledore nodded as though he hadn’t been expecting anything else. “Should you change your mind, we would be happy to have you.” The Headmaster sat back and looked around the stable, sending a vague smile in the direction of the sleeping goats. “Harry, I also came because I have a request.”

“Oh?”

“As you know, we are at war. What you do not know is that Aberforth regularly provided me with information he overheard. The Hog’s Head does attract a rather…diverse clientele, some patrons less savoury than others. I have been hoping that I could engage you and perhaps the Dearborns in continuing in Aberforth’s footsteps.”

“So you want me to play spy in my own pub?” Harry asked, keeping his voice even, though he was a bit rankled that Dumbledore thought Ab had kept secrets from him.

Dumbledore had winced at the word ‘spy.’ “Well, Harry, yes, I suppose you could describe it that way.”

Harry mulled this over very carefully before responding. “Okay, I can’t speak for the Dearborns, but I’m happy to help. I’ll let you know if I overhear something that I think you should know.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Thank you, our enemy has spies in the strangest of places, however, so I would appreciate if you do not mention this to anyone else. I know you are close with Mr. Pepst, for example, but–”

He could feel his face harden. Maybe he’d lived with Ab too long (*or was it just long enough?*), but he wasn’t keen on anyone telling him what to do regarding his friends and family, and the
Headmaster’s prettied-up command rankled him.

“I’ll be discreet, of course,” he cut in, “but I won’t be keeping things from Pel. And honestly, I think I can tell who to trust for myself, thanks.” He paused. “Sir.”

“Harry, I must insist–these are desperately dangerous times and we must place our trust–”

You fucking Obliviated me, and you want to talk to me about trust? Goddammit, Headmaster, please don’t be like this!

“Let me be clear, Albus,” Harry said, surprised by his own coolness. the coolness of his own voice. “I’ll be your ally, but only that. You aren’t my captain, or my boss. If that isn’t okay with you then we don’t have to do this at all.”

If he Obliviates me again, Guin will figure it out, and I’ll know whenever I next touch my wand.

Dumbledore stared at him for several heartbeats, his expression closed. Finally he sighed and sat back. He stretched out his hand, a genial smile growing on his lips. “Then let us be allies, Harry.”

After they had shaken hands, with Dumbledore promising a letter outlining the best ways to send him information, the Headmaster departed out the stable door.

“You can come on in, Guin.”

She entered and threw an arm around his shoulders. “Well done, Harry.” Her laugh turned incredulous. “And I cannot believe you had the stones to call Dumbledore by his first name!”

xoxoxox

9 August, 1978

“This…this place is amazing,” Harry breathed.

His eyes didn’t know where to look as he stared at a shop filled with a museum’s worth of curiosities. Hundreds of whirring, ticking, and singing contraptions in wood, porcelain, silver, gold, and gems filled the shelves and walls of Prewetts’ Prodigious Clocks.

It was overwhelming; everything was beautiful, or fascinating, or both.

“You two…you seriously made all of this?”

“Of course!” Fabian Prewett enthused, grabbing Harry’s arm to continue giving the tour of the shop.

Fabian and Gideon had been in the Head for lunch or dinner nearly every day since Harry’s return, and they (well, Fabian), had been clamouring for him to stop in. Surrounded by the brothers’ creations, he was reminded, for the first time in a long time, of how wondrous and whimsical magic really could be.

It’s like walking into the Great Hall for the first time.

“You’ve got to take a look at this one! It’s one of our newer inventions–we based it on the Americans’ meter that’s charmed to show the current threat level of magical exposure. You know, how close the Muggles are to finding out about us. We figured, sure, we could make one like the MACUSA has, but how boring is it to do something that’s already been done, yeah?”

Harry studied the stately freestanding clock. In place of numbers it had a silver band bearing elegant
script. Irritated, Anxious, Content. His brows shot up. Aroused?

“What—”

“Rather than reading how close people are to knowing something, we used runes and charms so that it would instead read the prevailing emotions of a place. It doesn’t tell time, it tells the mood! Isn’t that great? This way a person can come home and see what kind of day their spouse had by just looking at their clock!”

It was very beautiful, though Harry suspected a magical mood clock would spark more than a few household arguments.

“Of course, there are some kinks to work out still…” Fabian mused. “It can get a little confused if one person is randy, another is sleepy, and a third is irritated, but we’re working on adding more hands.”

“That’s still really cool…Whoa, what’s that one?” Although he assumed it was a clock, it was unlike any timepiece he’d ever seen. It was a set of overlapping gold-rimmed circles trimmed with runes upon which dozens of hands were ticking along at different speeds.

“Ah, that’s a beauty! It’s a planetary clock. Keeps track of all the planets, moons, the sun, everything in our solar system! Great for astronomers and diviners, but dead impossible for a layperson to read. Still, we’ve a few interested parties already—”

A blue clockwork bird suddenly landed on Harry’s shoulder. “Hello. It is currently 4:19,” it piped before flying off through the store.

Harry quirked an eyebrow at Fabian.

“We’re still working on Chronitus there, he’s just a prototype. See, he’s meant to live quietly in a house and answer if asked the time by the occupants, but turns out he’s more independent than planned. He just randomly inform us of the time whenever he feels like it. ‘Least he tells the right time, I guess.”

Because everyone wants a little bird that hangs out and tells them the time.

Harry paused.

Actually, I wouldn’t really mind having a little bird that told me the time, come to think of it.

“That’s a lovely idea,” he decided. “Really magical.”

Fabian grinned again—does his face ever hurt from smiling so much?—and led Harry to a long counter filled with every sort of wrist and pocket watch imaginable. “These are mostly just regular timepieces, though we have a ton of add-on charms to make them special.”

Harry’s eyes were caught by Fabian’s own watch. It was rather plain.

“Oh, you noticed mine, huh?” The redhead looked a little embarrassed. “It’s actually not one of ours—I know, I know, bad for business. But my dad gave it to me on my seventeenth, and he died not long after. It’s not much, but it’s from him, y’know?”

Harry nodded silently. He wouldn’t have exchanged it either.

“Time for a customer!” A silken voice proclaimed to the store at large as Harry turned to see an
older couple walking in.

“Oh, I should get this. Gid’s a shit salesman. Why don’t you go back to the workroom with him for a bit, yeah Harry?”

His eyes widened as he headed off through the indicated curtain at the back of the store. Everywhere he looked there were clock faces, many of them twisted in strange ways that spoke of magical experimentation. It reminded him a bit of a painting he’d seen as a child, though what had been disturbing in that picture was somehow strangely beautiful here.

A cacophony of crammed drawers, buckets, and jugs. Bookshelves stuffed with a hodge-podge of volumes. Unfinished wooden tables were filled with carpentry tools. The sweet smell of wood shavings filled the air. And scattered about everywhere mechanisms ticked away at different intervals, making Harry feel like the room existed in a place that was completely beyond the regular rules of time.

A place beyond time.

A good room for a time- and dimensional traveller, I suppose. Harry smiled to himself.

Gideon was bent over something spindly, quietly muttering while pointing a thin, short wand that looked rather like knitting needle.

Harry felt loath to disturb the man, and instead took a seat to quietly watch him work.

Minutes passed by, but the constant susurration of the clocks made time seem strangely fluid. Gideon muttered long string after long string of the tiniest of spells. The man’s hands—rather skilful hands, he noticed idly—were in a constant stream of motion, but the motions were so small, so deft, that a casual observer might not even notice.

If he concentrated just right, he could feel the faintest whisper of Gideon’s magic, but never more than that.

“Do you plan on staring at me much longer?”

Harry nearly toppled off his stool. The casting had stopped at some point and Gideon had turned to peer at him.

“Oh! Um, yeah, sorry about that, Gideon. I just…well, I’ve never seen magic like that before.”

He eyed Harry for a moment before shrugging. “It’s okay. I just get nervous when someone’s watching me work.” The sound of murmuring clocks stretch between them. “I have to kick Fab out all the time.”

Harry took the comment as an opening for more conversation. “So you do most of the actual making of the clocks then?”

Gideon nodded. “Yeah, Fab’s the ideas man—he’s a real inventor. Comes up with all sorts of crazy possibilities. He’s great at Charms and Transfiguration, so it’s often him that plans things. I’m the one who makes them.”

“Well…what were those spells you were casting? And is that your wand?” Harry asked.

“Uh, yeah, I’ve got a set of these. They’ve have cores and everything, but are designed to specialise in detailed spellwork. As for the spells,” Gideon hesitated, “well, come and watch.”
Harry approached and leaned over the worktable to examine a delicate wrist watch wrought in rose gold, its face unfinished. “I’m attaching the numbers to the clock-face, see?”

Gideon murmured an incantation over a miniscule blob of metal, drawing the numeral in the air. The tiny V drifted into place and hardened as if it had always been there.

“Wow,” Harry breathed, “that’s really cool.”

The redhead looked embarrassed, but the corner of his lip twitched. “Nah, they’re not that difficult.”

“Really? Could have fooled me.”

“No, seriously, it’s nothing special.” Gideon moved suddenly to grab his arm, but then drew his hand back. “Let me show you. Actually, come outside so we don’t hit anything in the shop.”

He led Harry into the back garden and over to a small shed at the edge of the property. “Okay, doing it with a material is more difficult, so let’s just do the engraving spell—that’s the most basic. The incantation is *Epigrapheo*, and write in the air with your wand what you want to appear on the shed wall, then finish with an even jab. Watch.”

He said incantation, and then *Gideon Prewett* was suddenly carved into the shed’s wall.

Harry’s eyes widened. “You did the engraving on my watch!”

Gideon gave him look clearly stating of course. “Now you try.”

“Okay… *Epigrapheo*.”

He was tracing the second of the two Ts in his surname when he remembered it wasn’t *Potter* anymore. *Fuck!*

Instead of the even jab at the end he made a panicking slashing motion, resulting in an ugly gash in the shed’s stone wall.

“Well, that’s a little more violent than necessary,” Gideon remarked blandly, as Harry gave a nervous laugh. “Try again.”

*When was the last time I messed up my own name?* Harry grumbled as he did so. *This is so embarrassing.*

He finished his second attempt and chanced a look.

*Ugh, and so is that.*

*Well, it’s my name.*

*It’s just nearly a foot high and looks like a four-year-old wrote it.*

Gideon smiled though. “Not bad. You’d have to practice to make it look nicer, but not bad.”

He turned his head and grinned back at the man. Harry’s stomach fluttered oddly.

“Oi, Gid!” His brother’s voice from the window had Gideon jumping back a few inches. “You going to help me close up or not?”

“Yeah, Fabe, on my way!”
Harry walked the short way back to the Head, doing his best to ignore the little hop in his step as he wondered if Gideon and Fabian would come to the pub for dinner again that night.

**14 August, 1978**

The ancient woman hobbled steadily into the bar. Harry, who was quietly enjoying his morning cuppa and a few kippers, stared at her blankly.

*We’re closed* was on the tip of his tongue—really, it wasn’t gone nine in the morning yet—but the woman’s set expression and formidable stride conspired to give the impression of a person who didn’t care much about regular operating hours.

Instead, he slipped behind the bar.

She maneuvered herself onto another bar chair and looked at him expectantly.

“What’ll it be, ma’am?” he asked, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice.

“Tea with honey and a nice splash of Firewhiskey, young man. And some conversation, if you please.”

A few minutes later she delicately sipped and grimaced into the steam. “That hardly constitutes a ‘nice splash.’”

He topped her off with silently, though the corner of his mouth curled into a smile.

“Much better. Now I don’t suppose you know who I am, do you?” She glanced at him before he could answer. “No, I can tell you don’t. I am Griselda Marchbanks, the current Head of the Wizarding Examinations Board of Great Britain, and a member of the Wizengamot.”

The name was vaguely familiar to Harry. *Wait—* “You’re one of the few who voted in my favor at my trial, aren’t you? I think Ab mentioned your name.”

“Indeed, Mr. Aberforth,” her voice and smile alike were tight, “ridiculous farce that it was. A comedy of errors made all the more ludicrous by recent developments, or so I’ve heard.” She drank deeply. “Imagine my shock at the novelty of it. A wizard pretending to be a squib, keeping his secret despite the threat to his life! It’s very modern and avant-garde, I suppose.”

“I take it that reports of my status have gotten around the Ministry then?”

Marchbanks made an indelicate noise. “Don’t flatter yourself, young man. You’re hardly newsworthy these days. I’m simply notified of all exam scores for British students, and your OWL results—really, Belgium of all places?—caught my eye when they came across my desk. After that, it wasn’t difficult to figure out your identity. Lovely choice for a surname.”

Harry was mostly certain she wasn’t being sarcastic.

“So, are you here because I’m in trouble for lying? I know the law, ma’am, it’s not illegal to—”

“Merlin’s sake, calm yourself. I don’t care what you did or why you did it. A woman my age can only care about three things at any given time. Right now, I’m concerned with this war, the students of Great Britain, and enjoying a bowel movement that has proven, alas, quite intransigent. You, young man, simply don’t make the cut.”
Well then.

“Um…good luck with all that, ma’am?”

Marchbanks clucked in disapproval before settling back into her bar chair.

“You were impressive at your trial, you know,” she remarked, tracing the rim of teacup with an idle finger. “Fierce. Bold. Too self-righteous for my taste, but such is youth. Your trouncing of my colleagues was rather the highlight of my year.” She pursed her lips and scrutinized him. “Tell me, Mr. Aberforth, do you approach all things in your life that way?”

Harry furrowed his brow. *What is she on about? I, well–*

“Aberforth was quite taken with you, of course,” she spoke over him. “He’s always been the harder Dumbledore to impress. Reflects well on you, I suppose. I examined them both, you know, back when they were students. Albus was beyond brilliant, but Aberforth…he was always the one with clearer eyes, so to speak, the one who saw the world as it actually was.”

With that Harry had had enough. He wasn’t interested in listening to someone reminisce about Ab this early in the morning.

“Madame Marchbanks. I think it’s time you stop talking around things and start actually talking about them, if you really want to have a conversation.”

The ancient woman laughed. “Oh yes, you are Aberforth’s aren’t you? Ah, very well then. I doubt you are aware, but he and I corresponded before his passing. I did a bit of digging, you see, and discovered that he was likely involved in the disappearance of some of our Muggleborn students last year, students who randomly reappeared in the colonies and in France some time later. Do you know anything about this?”

*I don’t–should I?–it won’t hurt Ab, but the others–*

Harry opted to say nothing. The truth could implicate Myrtle, Caff, and the rest of Platform Nine, and he suspected that a woman like Marchbanks would have little trouble catching him in a lie.

She stared him down for several moments, and Harry fought not to squirm. Marchbanks finally sat back with a satisfied smile.

“Good. You can keep your mouth shut. Very good.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m a bartender, ma’am.”

The woman hummed. “Suffice it to say I’ve been informed, in very general terms, of Platform Nine and their efforts to ensure the safety of vulnerable students and their families. And I very much appreciate that result.” Marchbanks sighed. “But I fear that worse is yet to come. It was about this that Aberforth and I corresponded.”

*She…she wants help.*

“My department at the Ministry is hardly secure. There have been at least two attempts to access—not sabotage, mind you, just access—the book that keeps information on current and former students. As it stores addresses, it is hardly difficult to divine why they would want the book. It stores addresses. It’s also connected to the Trace used to track underage magic.”

*Bloody fucking hell. The Death Eaters could do a ton of damage with that.*
"I can see by the look on your face that you realize the implications. Indeed, the DMLE is monitoring the situation and searching for the would-be thieves, but I have little confidence in their success. For all I know, the enemy has managed to copy it without our notice after all." She sniffed in disdain and motioned for Harry to get her another drink. "No, skip the tea young man. Two fingers of whiskey and honey only, please."

The woman drank deeply from her tumbler.

"The Muggleborn and their families are the lowest priority for the DMLE. When Muggleborn are the victims of attacks, I doubt they'll respond as quickly as we would like. Indeed, in many cases their families don’t even have the ability to contact Aurors. We only learn about attacks when their inexplicable deaths are reported in the Muggle news. Already we’ve had a number of such confrontations this summer."

Harry’s eyes widened.

"Yes, it hasn’t been publicly reported, and current students were thankfully uninvolved. Thus far only adult Muggleborn have been attacked, most of them living in the Muggle world. I suspect that these raids have been initiations of some kind. The important point is that they are localized attacks that seem to occur randomly, unlike the previous attempts to target students as they returned from school."

“What do you want me to do?"

“Aberforth hinted that Platform Nine had a way for Muggleborn and their families to call for help should they suffer an attack. I want you to spread this method to as many students and their families as you can. Graduates as well, if possible. And I want you and your allies to answer when they call."

_The dog tags. She means the dog tags that I helped Myrtle make._

“Why not someone—”

“Someone else? The DMLE is compromised and overtaxed. They will not come in time. While there may be…other covert organizations, their priorities are also different. This would be the province of your group."

She fixed him with a hard look.

“Make no mistake, Mr. Aberforth, promulgating this method of contact and engaging in hostilities with other wizards in the Muggle world occupy legal gray areas at best. If you expose our world, you may well be charged with breaking the Statue of Secrecy, and if anyone is killed you would likely face trials, perhaps even convictions, for murder as vigilantes."

Marchbanks’ expression darkened. “And should any of you be caught, I will deny having anything to do with any operation.”

“So you want us to stick our necks out—” Harry began indignantly.

“But I won’t stick out my own. Correct.” The woman’s eyes were apologetic, but her voice was as hard as steel. “The balance in the Wizengamot is shifting more and more towards our enemy. There are few courageous enough to stand up in those halls and vigorously oppose them. I am proud to say I am one of those few. After all, I can’t live all that much longer anyway, now can I?"

Harry didn’t join in as she cackled out a dry laugh.
“We need every vote against that man, Mr. Aberforth, else he will run roughshod over Britain with the law as his shield and his sword alike. I cannot sacrifice my position to protect yours, no matter how much I may wish otherwise. If you agree to help in this, you and yours are on your own. I will get you the information, and nothing more.”

She polished off the rest of her whiskey.

Harry wanted to bite at her for her cowardice, for valuing her position over theirs. *We’ll be the ones risking our lives, dammit!*  

But then he remembered the four lone wand lights raised in support of him at his trial. He’d been devastated by the number and focused entirely on his own fear, his own life. Looking back, he realized he’d never stopped to think about the guts it must have taken those four to stand among their peers and publicly vote their conscience rather than their politics.

*We do need people like her in power. We need them desperately.*

He turned and studied the old woman who was staring at him without a hint of apology.

*She knows what she’s asking of us.*

Ab’s voice intruded, *I reckon war’s about hard choices. She’s made hers. What’s yours, lad?*

His eye caught on the figure surmounting her cane, a great cat rendered mid-pounce.

*Fitting, that.*

“I understand,” Harry finally responded, holding out his hand. “I can’t speak for the others yet—it’s their choice. But I’m in.”

Marchbanks’ smile was no more than a slight twitch at the corners of her mouth as she retrieved a book from her handbag and unshrunk it. “Here is a copy of the book. Keep it secret and safe. And pour more whiskey, Mr. Aberforth, whiskey for us both.”

xoxoxox

**24 August, 1978**

Harry looked over at Doc and Guin. Their wide eyes matched his own.

*They felt it too. It’s not my imagination.*

*Holy shite, already? It’s not even been two weeks!*

He shook off his surprise and jerked his hand away from his chest. *It’s my turn in the rotation. Shite. This is really happening. “Oi, Doc! I’m gonna check on the stock of Steaming Stout. You got up here?”*

Doc nodded slowly while Guin tugged nervously at her apron.

From his seat at the bar Pel tipped him a wink. *Well, at least there’s a solicitor on hand if this all goes pear-shaped.*

Harry headed to the stable rather than the cellar, and Apparated to Myrtle’s warehouse for his first night with a team from the re-formed Platform Nine.
Myrtle, the Dearborns, and the others involved in the group’s activities the previous year had agreed to organize again to protect the Muggleborn. Word had spread, and new faces became regular sights at the warehouse. Most were other Muggleborn, while some were simply eager to make a name for themselves as mercenaries.

All had sworn an oath to keep the other members’ identities a secret and not to reveal their activities to anyone but their solicitors.

Harry swallowed hard and looked around. *My first night as a vigilante.*

Myrtle was holding court around the table. Harry recognised Will Armstrong, the dark-skinned wizard who had been in the original Platform Nine, nodding back in greeting. The other two were strangers.

“Well,” Myrtle said calmly, “as expected, I did a wonderful job with these.”

*Modest, Myrtle,* Harry thought. *But they are awesome.*

The enchantress’ new and improved dog tags were the cornerstone of their plan to protect the Muggleborn. Unlike the earlier model, the ones given to families weren’t restricted to only calling blood relations, while each member of Platform Nine had their own master tag that was connected to the massive map of Britain in Myrtle’s warehouse. Whenever someone called for help, it would grow warm and the address of the distress signal would appear on the tag’s silver face.

Nonetheless, convincing the Muggleborn families to either leave Britain or to at least accept the dog tags was not an easy task. Some were uninterested, or even too scared of the Nines (as the group now called itself) to even speak with them. Most took a fair amount of time to convince of both the group’s trustworthiness and the severity of the situation. With spokespeople like Myrtle, Harry couldn’t blame them, though Guin was having unprecedented success.

Maybe it’s because she takes home-made pastries with her. Maybe people believe scary wizarding messengers telling them that they’re going to be targeted for extermination more easily when those warnings come with blueberry scones.

All told, they’d persuaded almost two dozen families to leave thus far, and about the same number to take the dog tags.

*And we’re not even halfway through the list of current students.* Harry was astounded and rather sickened by the number of Muggleborns here compared to the number in his own world. *My God, how many people really died in the war in my world, anyway? Where did they all go?*

*Come to think of it, did I ever even meet an adult Muggleborn back in my world?*

*Jesus…*

He’d had to constantly shake off those thoughts as a bad job and focus on the task of getting the helpless either out of Britain or wired into the tag network.

But tonight was their first time receiving a distress call.

“All right, dears, you know the drill.” Myrtle pulled him out of his thoughts with a voice that was a strange hybrid of breathy girl and seasoned drill instructor. “Glamours on, Apparate to one hundred meters outside the property, and we’ll quietly see what needs doing before moving in. Anyone gets hurt bad enough, they come back here. I’ve got Pierce on standby”—Myrtle nodded towards the man in the corner who had some healing training—“for that. If we capture anyone, we bring them back
here for interrogation.”

She didn’t have say what would happen to those captured afterwards. Out of fear it might be an undercover Auror, Gigi the once-licensed Obliviator had been recruited from Caffrey’s crew. Anyone who could prove they were an Auror would get to leave, minus several hours’ worth of memories.

Without Veritaserum it was futile to try interrogating real Death Eaters. The group had been sharply divided over their plan for the captured. Many, led by Myrtle, had advocated for simply executing them, while others, especially Doc, resisted the idea entirely.

“It just doesn’t sit right with me to play judge, jury, and executioner,” Doc had said.

The vote had been close, but Doc’s faction narrowly prevailed. After having any memory of the Nines Obliviated, the prisoners, stupefied and bound, were to be portkeyed directly to the Ministry with an anonymous note explaining the circumstances of their capture. Myrtle didn’t seem to think that it would accomplish much of anything, but the hesitancy of the group wore down her opposition.

Harry…Harry didn’t know what he thought.

Half the time he could only think of Sirius, his Sirius, and worry that somehow they’d harm an innocent who just seemed guilty. The other half the time, Pettigrew’s face in the graveyard mocked him, reminding Harry of the dangers of letting a known enemy go.

In the end, he had abstained from voting and silently went along with the majority’s decision.

As he began applying his glamour for the Nines’ first foray against Death Eaters, a thought struck him cold.

_People are probably going to die tonight._

His stomach contracted.

_I’ve been in lots of fights before. I’ve had to kill people. What the hell is wrong with me?_

...

Yeah, I’ve had to do this before…but I’ve never gone purposefully into a fight like this.

...

This is the first time I’ve gone hunting for war.

Harry looked around at his now-glamoured teammates. Some he knew, others were strangers. All looked grim and determined.

It’s a job that needs doing.

“You about ready, Harry?” Myrtle asked, now looking fifteen years younger and very blonde.

And it’s a job I can do.

“Yeah. I’m good to go.”

She nodded once and surveyed the group.
“Go.”

All told, no one would ever sing songs of the battle at the house of a second-year Ravenclaw called Margaret Kincaid, Harry mused as he watched the family pack up their car.

It hadn’t really been a battle at all. Within minutes of their arrival at the secluded cottage, it was clear that the Death Eaters torturing Miss Kincaid’s father were hardly seasoned veterans. Four were young men, there was a paunchy older one, and only the final two, who were giving the orders, seemed like they could present a challenge.

Marchbanks was right. This is an initiation for the younger ones and the older bloke.

And honestly, Harry concluded as he thought through the fight, they were kind of a joke.

So confident in their invincibility, the Death Eaters hadn’t bothered to set charms that would monitor the property, and all were facing towards the bound Muggleborn girl and her family.

The Nines hadn’t needed to do much to defeat them.

“As one we Stupefy five of them. Armstrong and I will get the leaders, the rest of you go after three of the younger guys. Whoever’s done first will get the rest,” Myrtle had ordered.

In the blink of an eye five bodies slumped to the ground. Both Myrtle and Will Armstrong nailed the older recruit, but the final man surprised them all by blocking the three stunners sent at him. Harry had spied him reaching into his pocket–

Portkey!

his mind screamed–while simultaneously moving to grab Miss Kincaid.

Oh no you fucking don’t!

He had been planning on casting a Fire Whip to keep the man’s hands off the terrified twelve-year-old. His instincts apparently had other ideas, as he cast Tweeny Twig’s vegetable-peeling curse instead.

It was shockingly effective. The world seemed to pause for a moment as the top several layers of flesh on the man’s arm were audibly ripped away. Screaming, he made a valiant effort to grab his portkey but was hit by a stunner even as he disappeared.

“Fuck, Harry,” Myrtle had murmured. “Another spell may have been smarter, but flaying a man’s arm might make some of his mates think twice about becoming Death Eaters.”

The clean-up had taken less than ten minutes. Myrtle and the other two Apparated the unconscious prisoners back to the warehouse while Harry and Will took charge of the Kincaid family. Only the father had been subjected to torture, and the Death Eaters hadn’t had time to do permanent damage. Harry had healed the man’s lacerations in a heartbeat.

The Kincaids, who had been reluctant to even accept the dog tag, were now quite convinced that leaving Britain was in their best interest. Five minutes later the family had loaded up their car to head for the Birmingham airport. From there they were on to, well, wherever.

Mrs. Kincaid hadn’t been able to look at Harry after she spied the Death Eater’s peeled skin still lying in her front garden.

I can’t really blame her. With a flick of his wand he burnt the flesh to ashes.
As they watched the car pull away from the house, Will sighed. “We’re going to be getting more of these calls, aren’t we.”

It wasn’t a question.

“This war, everything, it’s all such rubbish.”

Harry nodded. “But that girl and her family would have died if we hadn’t helped. Gotta be worth something.”

The two men stood silently until the headlights of the family’s car faded into the horizon.

“Well, I’m for home then, Harry. My girl’s a Muggle and probably thinking I’m stepping out on her. Let’s get out of here in case the Aurors actually show up.”

Harry nodded again, and the two Disapparated.

The Aurors never arrived to find a deserted cottage and small pile of ashes in the front garden.

xoxoxox

17 September, 1978

A few weeks later, Harry was burying bones underneath a tree.

Eleven of them this time.

... 

They sent more. And there were some more experienced people with the recruits.

They know they’re being hunted, and they’re starting to take it seriously.

Since that first distress signal, the Nines had responded to eight more calls from Muggleborn families. They had hoped that the activity would die down once the children who were remaining in Britain returned to Hogwarts, but instead the Death Eaters actually started targeting more families. Myrtle guessed that news of murdered families would spread fear throughout the halls of Hogwarts like nothing else could.

Harry suspected she was correct.

Thus far the Nines had been victorious, to varying degrees, in all but two of the emergency calls. They discovered they couldn’t effectively combat attacks on apartment buildings without violating the Statute of Secrecy, though Myrtle assured them that she was working on the problem. It did little to assuage their guilt that they got to both families far, far too late, or that they were left to bury three of their own.

After their first few battles, if they could be called that, the Death Eaters had finally started fighting more intelligently. They set perimeter charms, stationed guards, and became less assured of their invulnerability when in the Muggle world.

And so they became much more dangerous.

Everyone in Platform Nine looked grimmer these days. Theirs were now fights that couldn’t be ended with a Stupefy. In the last three raids they hadn’t been able to capture more than one alive.
It had been Harry’s bright idea to transfigure the corpses of slain enemies to bones.

Easy. Quick. Clean.

He tried very hard not to remember that he got the idea from Barty Crouch Junior’s disposal of his own father.

He wasn’t successful.

Harry himself had only been present for five of the battles, as he and the Dearborns continued to observe a rotation so as not to arouse their patrons’ suspicion.

The fighting was one thing, but the aftermath…

Doc’s idealistic plan to hand over their prisoners to the DMLE had failed entirely. On their fourth raid the Nines had captured two Death Eaters, only to realize that they were the same men that had been captured at the Kincaid house.

Myrtle had interrogated them–Harry didn’t want to dwell on how she probably conducted those interrogations–and called another meeting.

“The Ministry released everyone we’ve sent to them. Most don’t have Dark Marks, most didn’t get a chance to actually kill anyone, and there aren’t any complaining witnesses since their victims have all left the country. They can also tell they’ve been Obliviated, so they trust their word even less.”

Everyone had known what she was going to say next.

“We give them to the Ministry, they’ll just be back on the streets, trying to kill us and the Muggleborn a week later for lack of evidence.”

Another vote was taken.

The captured would no longer be leaving the warehouse alive.

Doc had raised his hand, his face frozen and dull.

Harry hadn’t felt much of anything as he did the same.

I hate this war.

Myrtle had pulled him aside after the vote, her expression set. “You aren’t going to be involved in interrogations or what happens after.”

“Why? I’m a part of this just as much—”

“You’re a nice kid,” she had interrupted in a flat voice. “You’re permanently assigned to the cleanup crew.”

“But it isn’t fair to the others!”

Myrtle had just raised an eyebrow, her jagged silver glasses gleaming in the fluorescent lights of the warehouse. “Nope. Probably isn’t. But you’re a damn fine fighter, and a clever kid. You’re more valuable to us out there than you are broken down to nothing by what’s going to happen in here. I saw your face tonight, and I don’t need that drama.”

Before he could protest again, Myrtle had shaken her head and planted a firm kiss on his lips. “Shut
up, Harry. It’s decided.”

He had sputtered at that kiss. “Uh, Myrtle, no offense but I can’t tell if you’re seriously flirting and I’m, well, I’m not interested—”

“Harry, you’re adorable and quite as bent as a butcher’s hook. Now, off you go. I have things to do.”

His stomach had lurched for a reason entirely unconnected with executing illegally-captured war criminals.

*Christ, is it obvious then? Does everyone know?*

So in addition to fretting about his apparently evident queerness, Harry had been left feeling like a little kid who received special treatment. He was now permanently assigned to clean-up duty, which typically involved burying transfigured bodies and helping the survivors escape.

Tonight he stared at the newly-disturbed earth under an old ash tree, below which rested all that remained of eleven people who had chosen to put on masks and become murderers. Some had died quickly, others had suffered, but all had ended up here in a small hole in a Muggleborn’s back garden.

*And I’m a killer in a mask now too,* he thought as he rubbed his glamoured face. *I’m different from them, I know. But sometimes it doesn’t feel like I’m different enough.*

With a sigh he idly wondered if Lily, James, and the other members of the Order of the Phoenix were standing beneath the same moon as he was and thinking long thoughts as they buried dead enemies.

Chapter End Notes

Next on *The Second String*: I can’t think of a decent teaser that isn’t a spoiler, so I’ll just say that I hope you come back for chapter 26, “Once Smitten, Twice Denied.”

Thanks to my amazing beta AverageFish, who saved all of you from reading a wretchedly bad scene filled with my very poor decisions. Seriously.
XXVI. Once Smitten, Twice Denied

6 October, 1978

Harry woke gasping.

*Oh bloody hell, that was…shit, that was a very nice dream.*

He moved uncomfortably and reached around for his wand to remove the sticky mess in his pants. His whole body jumped an inch off the hay when he realised that Goat was behind him nibbling on his hair. *Oh eurgh, the breath on my neck in the dream is way, way less sexy now. Jesus.*

With a shudder and a resolution to never think about that element of the dream again, Harry cast a few cleaning charms and relaxed back into his hay bed with a heady smile.

*That’s what? The sixth dream about workbenches and clocks in the last month?*

*I think I’m messed up. Clocks should not be a sex thing.*

He tried not dwelling on the identity of his dream partner and the very explicable reason why his subconscious had suddenly started sexualizing innocent timepieces.

*Besides, I don’t even know if he’s interested in men, let alone if he’s interested in me.*

He worried his lip.

*How do you find out if a person’s bent, anyway? I mean, really? You can’t just walk up to someone and ask them how they feel about buggering blokes, can you? Is there a codeword or something? Maybe some sort of revealing spell? Revelio Homosex—er—Homosexius?*

*...*

*God, I’m ridiculous.*

*I bet Caffrey would know...*

At that Harry’s common sense gave him a good slap. *Fuck’s sake, don’t write the Captain! God knows he’s got a track record for sending letters from whatever sea he’s sailing just to embarrass me!*

*He’s probably not bent anyway. We had one nice conversation. I’m seventeen and horny all the bloody time is all. He’s been polite enough when he comes into the Head, that’s it, and I’m polite right back.*

But Harry knew very well that while Gideon Prewett remained as polite, if taciturn, as ever, he himself had come to look forward to the young man’s visits to the Head more than was strictly *polite.*
Not that they interacted much beyond pleasantries. Nonetheless, Harry was coming to appreciate the fact the man was simply in the room, sketching ideas for clocks in that book of his or listening as Fabian prattled on about a new idea. Some days, after nights spent burying corpses in the darkened gardens of the Muggle world, nights he wanted desperately to pretend didn’t happen, Gideon’s presence was enough to make everything seem just a bit less awful.

Harry had been spared the horror of executing unarmed captives like many in the Nines had not, and thank Myrtle for that, he thought with a shudder. He suspected she’d been correct that performing such an act, one as necessary as it was monstrous, simply wasn’t in his nature. Nonetheless, the masked forms of those he and the others had needed to kill lest they kill others, the sound of spells destroying their bodies like so much meat, stayed with him.

*It’s the right thing to do,* he would repeat to himself as he watched the body of an enemy drop to the ground, and he believed it.

Being right didn’t mean it wasn’t brutal. Any idealistic rot about the nobility of battle had been burned from him by reality, leaving a numbed hollow in his heart.

But.

But Gideon was somehow *clean* of all that, and his arrival at the Head gave Harry something to look forward to in a world that had quickly turned into fields of mud, blood, and bone.

*And he’s really fit,* his inner voice interjected helpfully, pulling him out of the swirling morass of grim thoughts. *Don’t forget the fitness. That’s important.*

Harry huffed, but didn’t disagree with himself. Gideon *was* attractive, and his presence somehow made Harry feel better.

It was…really nice.

Granted, the last two weeks had seen the cessation—however temporary—of distress calls to Platform Nine. Voldemort obviously knew *someone* was protecting Muggleborn families, as he had stopped further initiation raids, at least for the time being. Harry could only surmise that the extremely low number of survivors wasn’t the best advertising for recruitment.

The reprieve was a welcome one, though they were all on edge waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Harry padded upstairs for a shower, grousing to himself about which was a greater impossibility: gauging someone else’s gayness or divining a Dark Lord’s plans.

xoxoxox

“Oh, good morning Harry!” a cheerful Guin greeted as he entered the public room. “Tuck in, then.” She passed him a plate of eggs and bacon.

“Cheers, Guin, thanks.”

Doc, who was lounging about reading the *Prophet*, gave Guin a pointed glance. His wife rolled her eyes.

“Say, Harry,” she began with studied nonchalance as she wiped down the bar, “we’ve been wanting to ask you how you would feel about moving out of the stable and into a proper bedroom.”

He stared. “Huh?”
“I doubt you want to hear it, but Ab’s room is, well, just gathering dust. We thought it might be a good idea for you to take it and make it your own, or maybe just move into a guest room and replace it with Ab’s. We don’t mean to disrespect him,” she rushed on, “but it’s just sitting there empty.”

Harry floundered. He’d never even considered the possibility.

“I think it’s a good idea, kid,” Doc added as Guin shot him a look. “As long as it stays there like that, you’ll be haunted. Of course, it’s your choice. Your place, after all. But you should think on it.”

A mischievous glint flashed in Guin’s eyes. “And really Harry, you should take some room at least for yourself. You’re a nice bloke, after all. A nice bloke who’ll hopefully be bringing a nice person back to his place for a good shag. No one you deserve will be much inclined to shag in a stable.”

**Oh my God.**

Doc choked on his tea, but she smiled, completely unapologetic. “Well, it’s true!”

Her husband mopped his chin and nodded at Harry in mock-seriousness. “She does have a point. Hay’s okay for sleeping on, I suppose, though I’ve no idea how you can stand the pointy bits. But a hay bed can’t be strong enough to withstand a shagging, at least if you’re doing it right.”

**I don’t even...Oh my God.**

“That’s a fair point, Harry!” The woman was entirely too enthusiastic. “You’ll only end up with a ruined bed and a bruised lover.”

Part of him was sure that he should be upset by the thought of changing Ab’s room, but most of him was simply gaping at the oddness of the conversation.

Taking a long swig of water, he finally found his voice. “So...um...you’re saying that I should have a proper room for shagging reasons?”

“Well, mostly because it’s healthy for a person to have a private place of their own, and it’ll help you with your grieving for Ab,” Guin admitted. “But the benefits for shagging are very real and shouldn’t be overlooked.”

“Oh—okay, Guin. Thanks for, uh, thinking of me.” Harry shook his head, willing the ground to swallow him whole. “I guess I’ll let you know.”

Guin beamed. “Great!”

“You know,” Doc mused after a few moments of awkward silence, “you’re under a lot of stress with the war and all right now. A good roll in the hay,” he grinned at his own wit, “can do wonders for that.”

**Merlin! Why is everything about sex this morning?**

“Yeah, uh, thanks Doc...Can we please stop talking about shagging now?”

“Suit yourself,” Doc shrugged, winking at Guin before turning back to the newspaper.

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**10 October, 1978**

Although Voldemort hadn’t been seen since his last Hogsmeade battle the previous year, the
discovery of marked supporters in the Ministry had left people feeling vulnerable, and it wasn’t getting any better.

Everyone needed a drink these days, it seemed.

At least it’s good for business, Harry sighed as he looked around the pub.

It wasn’t gone five on a Tuesday evening, but the Head was already packed. Pulling another round for the regulars, Harry’s eyes drifted to Fabian and Gideon, who were enjoying the last traces of daylight at a table by the window.

Like always, Fabian was chattering on while Gideon buried himself in his sketchbook, only looking up every so often to offer a comment. Apparently the latter had spent the afternoon painting something. Flecks of metallic gold and pale blue dotted his hands, and a thin line of gold traced the curve of Gideon’s cheekbone.

That damned streak of color seemed to follow Harry around the pub.

Why hasn’t Fabian told him he has paint on his face?

Someone should tell him he has paint on his face.

He frowned.

It’s really very distracting.

His eyes fixed on Gideon, he startled as the beer he was drawing overflowed onto his hands and shirt.

“Dammit!” Drying and cleaning charms removed all evidence of the spill, save for the barflies’ laughter. “Oh shut up,” he grumbled.

When Harry left for the kitchen to fix a plate of sandwiches, the band of regulars at the bar huddled together.

“You boys see that?” Dalcop muttered.

Nappy, Martial, and Pel nodded.

“Lad can’t keep his eyes off him,” Pel murmured with a resigned sigh. “Had to happen some time.”

“Ruddy hormones.”

The men clucked sympathetically.

Dalcop stole a look at Gideon. “So whadda we think a’ him then?”

All four swiveled on their bar stools to peer over at Gideon, then turned back, their heads bent in conference.

“Don’t seem a bad sort, really,” Nappy started.

Martial looked thoughtful. “Man does have a job...”
“Started ‘is own business, didn’ he? An’ just a few years outta school, too.”

Pel was more hesitant. “Well, he isn’t Caff Burke at least. But is he even interested in men? I don’t want to see the lad’s heart broken.”

“He don’ wear tight trousers…” Dalcop said dubiously. “Don’ all poofs wear tight trousers?”

“What the fuck are you on about? All poofs wear tight trousers!” Martial scoffed.

“Harry’s trousers are normal,” Nappy offered.

“Oh, belt up, all of you.” Pel said. “No, of course all poofs don’t dress the same, Merlin Dalcop. An’ don’t you boys be saying ‘poof’. It isn’t nice anyway an’ this is Harry we’re talking about.”

“A’right, a’right, ‘m sorry!” Dalcop blustered. “Didn’ mean anythin’ by it, a’ course. Anyway, what do we think of him? Tha’s what’s important here.”

They were interrupted by Loch coming up for another drink. The young werewolf eyed the cluster of barflies. “What are you lot conspiring about?”

“Tryin’ to figure if Gid Prewett over there’s a poof—uh, I mean, you know. A gay,” Dalcop piped up immediately.

Pel put his head in his hands.

Loch raised an eyebrow and turned to study Gideon. They all followed his gaze.

Gideon looked up from his sketchbook to meet several pairs of eyes. A faint flush colored his cheeks as he hastily looked back down and hunched his shoulders.

The group huddled back together in a parody of subtlety.

“Hard to tell, I think,” Loch said in a low voice. “He seems a decent enough bloke, but keeps himself to himself. I can ask around….”

“Aye, do that, lad. An’ if you can, find out anything bad about him while you’re at it,” Pel suggested. “I’ll have a friend look an’ see if he has a criminal record.”

Dalcop nodded heartily. “Yeah, yeah! S’ Harry we’re talking about here! Even if he is a poof that don’t mean he’s good enough for Harry.”

The men murmured their agreement. “Sounds like a plan, lads,” Pel concluded just as Harry returned from the kitchens with the sandwiches. “Act normal!” he hissed.

The barflies all dropped into an exaggerated silence that had the younger wizard looking at them suspiciously.

“What are you all up to?”

“Nothing!”

“Us?”

“—don’ know what yer talkin’ ‘bout.”

Harry rolled his eyes and went to drop off the sandwiches.
2 November, 1978

“They’re looking over here. Again. No—don’t look.”

“The regulars?” Fabian asked in a low voice.

Gideon nodded. “Look pretty arsed about something.”

Fabian waited a moment and stole a glance at the bar. Sure enough, the old drunks were taking it in turns to glare at the threesome sitting at the round table by the window.

“Dammit, Fabe, I told you not to look!”

“Any idea yet what you did to them?”

Gideon grimaced. “None. They’ve just been staring and whispering all month.”

“Surely they aren’t Death Eaters?” Emmeline Vance, the third in their party, asked with concern. The brothers chuckled and Fabian began explaining the various groups who frequented the pub.

Across the Head, the barflies looked at each other.

“She’s a pretty ‘un,” Nappy muttered.

“Too posh for a place like this,” Dalcop agreed, scowling at the dark-haired young woman. “Sitting awfully close to the both of ‘em, ain’t she?”

Pel watched the threesome carefully. “Hard to tell which she’s with.” His eyes traveled over to Harry, who was taking orders from Sanguini’s group in the shadows at the back of the public room.

“Harry’s a better catch,” Nappy said with certainty, joining Dalcop in glaring at Vance. “Ain’t nobody’s eyebrows look like that naturally.”

“Oh go on, stop being mean,” Martial snapped. “Girl’s eyebrows are fine.”

Meanwhile the Prewetts and Emmeline turned their attention back to their assignment for the evening and stole subtle looks at the table of vampires. The young owner of the Hog’s Head was laughing with Sanguini as he passed out glasses out bloodwine.

Gideon narrowed his eyes.

“They hardly look like they’re plotting anything….Ugh, at this rate we’ll be here all night,” Emmeline moaned.

“Not your kind of place, love?” Fabian teased, appraising her exquisitely-tailored robes. “Well, you are rather over-dressed for the company.” He ignored her scowl. “And honestly, I’m not sure we aren’t wasting our time on this one. They’re here a lot and seem a decent sort. I’m starting to think that Dumbledore doesn’t need to be concerned, at least about them.”

Emmeline rolled her eyes. “They’re Dark creatures, Prewett. It’s obvious that they’d side with a Dark Lord.”

“Maybe, love. Maybe. But I’ll wait and see.”
Gideon turned back to the conversation and nodded at his brother’s words. “Harry seems to like them well enough.”

“Well if Harry likes them…” Fabian yawned dramatically. “Hell, Gid. Harry’s the owner. It’s his job to like everybody.”

xoxoxox

11 November, 1978

What the hell? Harry stared at the crowd of students flooding into the Head. What the hell are they all doing here?

Of course, student patrons were no new thing on Hogsmeade weekends, but usually the Head only saw them once the more ‘child-friendly’ establishments in the village were full. The Prewetts’ clock hadn’t even chimed noon yet.

As Harry grabbed bottle after bottle of butterbeer, the hairs on his neck suddenly pricked in warning. Something’s wrong.

Senses honed by nights with the Nines had his wand in his hand, his stomach clenching and his eyes sharp as he surveyed the room.

The pub’s way too quiet for this number of people.

No matter where he looked, he found a student who had been eyeing him, only to turn away quickly and start whispering to their mates. Hushed conversations seemed to be taking place at every table.

More than anything else, the pub felt like a very excited library.

Something was definitely going on, Harry concluded as he stowed his wand, but it didn’t seem threatening. As the lunch hour wore on and the whispers continued, his wariness turned to irritation. He was on the verge of simply asking the pub at large what was so bloody interesting when the door swung open and the cold November wind blew in Sirius Black.

“Squibbulus!” his godfather’s counterpart greeted him with a toothy grin, flopping down on an empty barstool. “Keeping your nose clean?”

The pub erupted anew in louder whispers.

“My name’s Harry, Black.”

“We-ell, you’ll always be Squibbulus to me. Regardless of the accuracy of the moniker, of course.” Sirius popped a few nuts from the bowl on the bar into his mouth.

A hush fell over the room.

Sirius bristled and looked around suspiciously. “What’s with them?” he asked in a much quieter voice.

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. Been acting like this all day.”

When he came back moments later with Sirius’ ale, the man was smirking.

“Eavesdropping charm. Seems Hogwarts has heard about your little ruse, and all the kiddies are dead
curious about why you pretended to be a squib.”

Harry could have slapped himself. *All but the first years saw me at school last year, and they know all about the service to wizards.* Of course I’d be the topic of gossip.

...  

*And I need to ask Guin how to cast an eavesdropping charm.*

Outwardly, he just shrugged again. “Well then, their curiosity is helping to fill my vault, so I can’t complain.”

Sirius mock-toasted him with his pint. “One hell of a stunt though, mate. Can’t reckon why you’d do something that barmy, but as a prankster myself, I respect your commitment to the play.”

Harry snorted, and tipped his own glass back in response.

Some time later, a burning jolt of rage shot through him as he returned from fetching yet another crate of butterbeers and found that Sirius had been joined by a friend.

“Hey there, Harry. Nice to see you,” the young man greeted him politely.

_Pettigrew,_ his mind snarled. He clamped down on the instincts that were screaming for him to draw his wand and curse the rat _right fucking now._

_Cut that shit out! I’ve been through this. This Peter might not be a traitor. No doing things before I’m sure._

Harry’s smile felt as false as it was.

As the hours ticked by, he wondered more and more what Sirius and Peter were doing in the pub. They simply nursed their drinks and made conversation with each other. The rat hadn’t done anything that screamed ‘Death Eater’ or ‘cowardly friend-killing traitor,’ so Harry settled for watching them like a hawk.

Honestly, they just seemed like two mates drinking suspiciously slowly on a cold afternoon.

Harry wasn’t sure if he was disappointed or not.

When Gideon walked in for a late lunch, his forced smile relaxed into a real one and some of the tension drained from his shoulders.

Eventually the crowd of disappointed students left, with Sirius and Wormtail following closely after them. With a start Harry suddenly realized that the Marauders had probably been stationed at the pub to protect the kids.

Yeah, there are Aurors about, but I bet Dumbledore had his Order patrolling the village in case there’s a repeat of last year. He nodded to himself, appreciating that the other group wasn’t being lulled into complacency by Voldemort’s silence.

_Good on them. Platform Nine’s staying in the Muggle world—we don’t have political protection like the Order does—so if they can help here and we can help there, well, at least that’s something._

“Why don’t you like Pettigrew?”

Gideon’s voice from across the now-deserted pub startled him out of his thoughts.
He could have shrugged it off or tried to convince Gideon that he was misreading him. Instead, Harry bit his lip.

“I—I’m not sure,” he admitted carefully. “Bloke just rubs me the wrong way. Has since I met him at Hogwarts. He just…doesn’t feel right.”

The other man stared at him for a few beats before nodding slowly. “Fair enough. It’s just that you seem to like most people.”

Harry scoffed. “Hardly. I think most of the folks out there are bastards. But I think a lot of the people in here have, I dunno, something worth liking about them, even if they aren’t really likeable.”

Gideon nodded thoughtfully, and continued to look at him.

“Goddammit! I’ve gotten so I can read most of the regulars well enough, but the man is completely inscrutable!”

The nervous curl of excitement in Harry’s stomach grew as he stood there, meeting Gideon’s stare.

After a few more thudding heartbeats he couldn’t take the tension anymore. “So, uh, what are you working on today?” he asked, awkwardly gesturing to the man’s sketchbook.

And then to his delight Gideon was motioning him over, and Harry was sitting down in the booth next to him rather than across from him, and neither of them were remarking on that rather odd decision.

“It’s another emotional barometer invention based on MACUSA’s threat level gauge,” he started explaining. “I know Fabe showed you the one in the shop that measures the emotions of people in a house, yeah? Well, this one’s more ambitious. What we’re trying to do is create a barometer than measures a much larger area. All of Britain would be great, but right now that’s beyond us…”

It was difficult for Harry to pay as close attention as he wanted, given the excited voice in his head chanting *He’s talking! To me!*

“Anyway, we’re working on versions that can measure areas the size of about a quarter of Hogsmeade, half of Diagon Alley, that sort of thing.”

Harry frowned. “But what are you trying to measure?”

“Oh—this is the brilliant part—we want to make a barometer that can gauge the anger levels of the people within that area.” Harry must have looked confused, as Gideon rushed on. “It’s a way to help predict if Voldemort’s going to attack, see? If the barometer for an area suddenly spikes, then that might mean that an attack may be imminent. It won’t give us much advance time, but it’ll give us some, and that might make the difference between a successful attack and a failed one.”

Gideon’s eyes burned with excitement. “So what do you think, Harry?”

“This is…this is bloody brilliant, Gideon.”

A tinge of red crept into the man’s ears. “We were thinking we could even mount them in public places to help warn people, plus maybe put some in the Ministry, at Hogwarts—there are so many different ways to adapt the spells and runes…”

From there Gideon embarked on a detailed description of the formulas, runic schemes, and spells that
he was planning on using for the the emotional barometers. Having never taken most of the subjects required to understand his explanations, Harry contented himself with enjoying the sound of Gideon’s voice as he navigated through high-level magical theory.

*Fit and* smart, his internal voice approved. Like hell ‘Fabian’s the clever one’!

As Gideon expounded—and wasn’t that a verb that Harry never thought he’d apply to the typically quiet man—neither man seemed to notice that at some point their legs touched and stayed pressed lightly against the other’s, nor that Harry had leaned in rather closely to follow (or try to follow) the spell formulas that Gideon sketched out for him. As it had in the Prewetts’ workshop, time stuttered and blurred into meaninglessness, and Harry simply enjoyed being where he was and doing what he was doing.

“Well, Cassiopeia, it seems the cards did not lie to us. Patience *is* apparently required on our parts today!”

Both young men jumped as the biting tones of Professor Pemphredo wrenched them out of their own little world.

Harry turned to see a full table of divination gamblers glaring at him (well, Wigol was giggling), while a grinning Pel busied himself behind the bar pulling pints for Dalcop and Martial Sorner.

“Oh! I, um, I didn’t noticed you all came in,” he admitted, cringing. “Have you been waiting long?”

The gamblers glared. Dalcop’s shoulders were shaking with silent laughter.

Gideon shot up. “Thanks for lunch, Harry. But I need to get back to the shop. I’ll see you later.”

Harry flashed him a quick smile and then hurried over to get the gamblers’ drinks, shooing Pel out from behind the bar. “Everything’s coming right up, ladies and Wig. First round’s on the house. Er, sorry about the wait and all.”

No one said anything else until the door closed behind Gideon.

The moment it did, all the barflies sniggered loudly as Dalcop pantomimed a rapidly-beating heart.

“Oh, shove off,” Harry grumbled. “We were just talking about *clocks.*”

“Seems that last word had one too many consonants,” Pel retorted. Marty and Dalcop collapsed into giggles.

_Huh?

…

*Oh.*

“That’s just—I mean—oh, *shut up,* Pel!”

“You know, little Devil,” Pemphredo cut in, because that’s *just the perfect addition to this conversation,* ‘I’d be happy to do a reading and see if you’re in for any *tantalizing* new developments.”

Harry blanched. “Oh, no thanks, ma’am, seriously.”

“Oi, Professor—maybe we should have a little flutter on that, eh?” Dalcop asked.
The ancient teacher looked thoughtful. “I’d be happy to draw up odds, gentlemen.”

“Two galleons on the two of them being in bed together by the end of the month!” Marty Sorner proclaimed.

“What? No, guys, c’mon—”

Pel grinned as Harry tried to regain control of his pub. “I’ll start a list while the professor works on the odds.”

“Odds on what?” Guin asked as she came in from the kitchen.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He’d discovered a few weeks earlier that she’d riddled out the secret of the radio painting and had enlisted an enthusiastic Ariana as her accomplice. Guin now seemed to listen in on every conversation in the public room, so long as it was close to the bar; beyond that they just got static. Meanwhile Ariana took over the spying much of the rest of the time. Indeed, the painted girl had become absolutely obsessed with espionage.

Guin tipped him a wink.

_Ruddy Slytherin._

Dalcop responded, heedless to Guin’s eavesdropping. “If ’n how long it’ll be before Gid an’ Harry finally get to it.”

“Oh, what a fascinating idea! Doc and I will definitely want to make a few wagers.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “You know I really do hate you all, right?”

xoxoxox

**22 December, 1978**

November had turned into December with howling winds and continued silence from Voldemort. The Nines had taken to training together a few times a week, with members showing up to teach, learn, or run mock-missions whenever they had a free night.

Life at the Head plugged along as it always did. Thankfully the betting pool on Harry’s love life remained a private affair among the regulars, and those who had been sure he would be sharing a bed with Gideon within weeks had been forced to accept their losses.

The only real change was that Remus Lupin had become a fairly regular fixture at the Head. At first the young werewolf just sat alone and looked about the pub in distraction, as though he were waiting for someone who never showed.

While most of the regulars hadn’t really noticed the new addition, Harry most certainly had.

_Sirius did say that everyone started thinking that Professor Lupin was the traitor at some point. Guess I can see why. Damned if this doesn’t look suspicious._

He had little doubt that Lupin was absolutely _not_ a traitor, but decided to send Dumbledore a note mentioning the man’s suspicious loitering. Not to do so would itself seem suspicious, after all.

He’d only sent the Headmaster half a dozen or so such missives. The minions of the Dark Lord didn’t seem to use his pub all that much, at least not obviously. And certainly not the type of Death Eaters who would know anything worthwhile.
Being known as a Death-Eater killer isn’t so great for the spying game, I guess.

Dumbledore had thanked him for the information about Lupin and had urged him to keep his eyes open, but had noted that he “doubted young Mr. Lupin was up to anything nefarious.”

Good. Lupin doesn’t need the Headmaster doubting him.

After two weeks of solitary lingering, Remus had started a tentative friendship with Loch and his crowd of werewolves. At the same time, Harry observed that he often spent time with some of the more antisocial lycans who occasionally haunted the Head, blokes generally rougher than Loch.

Didn’t someone once say that the werewolves sided with Voldemort in the war? So what’s Lupin doing with them? Spying on them for Dumbledore? Or maybe for a time he did consider joining them in my world, but decided against it…. 

Harry had shrugged and decided to definitely follow Dumbledore’s advice and “keep his eyes open.”

Lupin was in early tonight, sitting with Loch at corner table by the Head’s sorry excuse for a Christmas tree.

Harry had meant to keep his eye on Lupin, really he had, but then Gideon arrived—without Fabian for once—and Harry suddenly felt it absolutely necessary to take a quick break for a spot of dinner.

The other man cocked a half-smile when Harry asked if he could join him, and the two fell into easy conversation about the clock maker’s current project, a commissioned piece for some ancient matriarch of a pureblood family which would keep track of each of her three dozen cats.

Gideon was despairing over the impossibility of making a mauve, lilac, and mother-of-pearl monstrosity that was divided into thirty-six dozen separate zones but still retained refined aesthetics. Harry stared absently at the frustrated hand running through red hair and tried to convince himself that he should spare a few glances in Lupin’s direction.

Instead, his mind stubbornly fixated on the question of whether or not Gideon was at all interested in him. Is he just being a nice? He talks to me more lately…but maybe he’s just shy and got over it? Goddammit, this is impossible! Maybe I should just ask? But then if he’s not interested I’ll be so humiliated and—

“—and of course the little beasts all have ridiculous names like Elagabalus, Woonsocket, and Monsieur Muckleshoot, so it’s impossible to even fit them in the space that I have—”

Gideon broke off as the Floo activated and Sirius Black entered the pub.

“Ah, sorry about that. Wrong stop.” His godfather’s counterpart sauntered out of the public room and into the Hogsmeade night with exaggerated nonchalance that left Harry shaking his head.

Christ, Sirius really is a shit liar.

His suspicion that his godfather’s arrival was no accident was confirmed when Remus Lupin immediately made excuses to Loch and followed his friend out the front door.

Well what are they up to?

Before he could think to do anything, Gideon lurched up from the table, spilling his half-eaten bowl of stew directly in Harry’s lap.
“Shit, shit, sorry Harry, but I just realized—I need, er—I mean, I have to go. I’ll, uh, pay for the stew later. Sorry.”

He grabbed his cloak and was out the front door before Harry even opened his mouth to respond.

*He never babbles like that. What the hell is going on here?*

A minute earlier Harry had been enjoying dinner with his…friend and now he had a lap full of potatoes, carrots, and beef.

He swept the mess onto the floor and vanished it. Before he could do the same to the gravy stain spreading across his groin, he felt a sudden heat on his chest.

*No.*

His heart started beating a tattoo against his ribs.

*It’s happening again.*

Numb fingers pulled the dog tag out from under his shirt. A sharp breath punctuated his surprise at the address of the distress call.

*54 Diagon Alley*

*What? Diagon Alley? Why would…It’s the hols. Did some Muggleborn student take their parents shopping?*

He’d find out soon enough. Harry cast a significant look at Doc before heading to the kitchen. Technically it was Guin’s turn in the rotation, but the young woman had spent the morning with a touch of flu.

When he entered, Guin was looking at her own dog tag and chewing her lip.

“You’ve been ill. I’ll go.”

Guin frowned. “Harry, no one’s going to go, you know that. We decided only to fight in the Muggle world, remember? We aren’t Aurors or the Order, we’re just vigilantes!”

The dog tag was still hot on his chest. “I know. I know all that,” Harry bit out in frustration. “But fuck this, Guin, I’m going. Besides, if one person goes he can at least give a first hand report to Myrtle afterwards. And if it’s a real fight, I don’t think anyone will mind an extra hand.”

“C’mon, no, *Harry*—,” Guin began, but caught herself when she saw the look on his face “Fine,” she sighed. “At least be careful, be *smart*, and for Merlin’s sake, don’t forget your glamour.”

Harry snapped a glamour on immediately and turned to leave. “Wait, which one is 54?”

“Er—not sure. It’d be around the Magical Menagerie, I thi—”

Harry was out the door and into the back garden. With a deep breath, he Apparated to London.

**xoxoxox**

Rather than popping into the middle of a fight, Harry chose to appear in a dark corner at the south end of Diagon.
If someone called for help from the Alley, I doubt it’s just one person being attacked.

He made his way towards Gringotts, carefully keeping to the shadows.

It didn’t take him long to catch the blinding flashes of spellfire and the acrid smell of smoke coming from far up ahead.

A lot of spellfire, and a lot of smoke.

He was nearly to Ollivander’s when he glimpsed a massive crowd fighting in the Gringotts plaza off in the distance. Fighters darted in and out of his limited field of vision and curses lit up the night.

This is where Sirius and Lupin went off to. I’m sure of it.

Oh God. Are my mum and dad here?

Suddenly a shriek, and then another accompanied by the sound of rapid-fire curses, shattered the silence to his right.

Harry paused, his instincts tugging him towards the scream—someone’s being hurt a block over—and his heart demanding he join the main battle ahead.

Another voice cried out.

Dammit.

He turned to slip behind the buildings to his right. Making his way through a grimy courtyard littered with broken bottles and between another set of buildings, Harry peered into a darkened, narrow street.

Oh hell. This is Knockturn.

A brilliant flash of blue light just up the street caught his attention. He smashed himself up against a wall and stared as two men stood back to back and defended themselves against a gang of eight Death Eaters. A few other masked figures were scattered about the street, all downed and unmoving.

His eyes slowly widened as he watched the pair.

They moved in a continuous circle with their backs to the other, the larger one casting so deftly that it took Harry a few moments to catch on to his strategy. His jaw dropped as he identified among standard shields and counter-curses the strangest assortment of spells he’d ever encountered. Childish, trivial, nuisance things—a nausea curse here, a spell to tie a man’s shoelaces together there, a curse to send dust into a person’s eyes—all cast so quickly that he doubted the attackers even noticed they’d been hit at first.

But their effects in tandem with the actions of his partner were devastating. As they circled, the smaller man slammed into the Death Eaters with high-powered blasting hexes and cutting curses, the sort of crippling but flashy spells their opponents should have been able to block. Yet the distractions the larger man kept sending slowed their reactions just enough that the group was being thoroughly demolished.

Up until this moment, Harry had thought he’d started to master fighting as part of a team thanks to his training on The Delight and with the Nines. But this…

Four more went down, their screams echoing in the empty street.
Harry figured he should help, but the pair didn’t really look like they needed it.

Two more down.

The remaining two fighters seemed more skilled than their companions, and the pair’s circling strategy didn’t appear to work as well against even numbers. Luckily the men noticed this and broke apart to take on a final opponent each.

*They’re a lot weaker on their own,* he observed clinically. The larger man who favored the nuisance spells was doing alright, but he lagged when casting offensive magic, while the smaller man was fast with his attacks but slow with his shields.

*They’re beginning to falter. I should*—

Harry stepped out to join the battle only to be clipped by a cutting curse to his side.

Three more Death Eaters had Apparated in and were advancing on him. Ignoring the blood seeping from under his ribs, he dropped into a crouch and flipped up a concussion shield, a defensive tactic Caff Burke had insisted he master. They couldn’t take many hits, but each spell that made contact would send a concussive blast back on the caster.

His ears rang with two solid gongs.

*Two out of three isn’t bad.* In fact, it seemed the third, smarter Death Eater had been caught in the concussion blast’s wash as well.

Harry canceled the shield and hit the first dazed Death Eater with a *Stupefy* followed by a refilling charm to the lungs. The unconscious man gurgled as he began drowning in his own blood.

*He won’t get back up again.*

His satisfaction was fleeting. The other two had recovered quickly, already scrambling to their feet.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” one shouted, but the spell was a pale sickly green and fizzled out before it got close to Harry.

*Guess he doesn’t have the power. Or maybe he didn’t really mean it.*

The Death Eater’s intentions didn’t matter.

*Leave them alive and they’ll just come back at you later.* The now all-too-familiar horror that accompanied the thought didn’t stop Harry from snaring the man’s wand arm with a paralysis hex before dispatching him with a *Diffindo* to the throat.

The third man had taken shelter behind a silvery, mercurial shield that Harry had never seen before. Moving with liquid grace, the Death Eater lowered the shield and rapidly followed it with another new spell, an orange flash with so much pressure behind it that Harry’s ears popped. He could only dive away.

*This guy…yeah, he’s faster than me. And he knows spells I don’t know.*

Shit.

He barely managed to shield against a volley of spells that blurred towards him in a colorful whirl.

*I don’t think I can beat him in a fair fight,* his mind observed with detachment as the man flicked
away some of Harry’s best explosive curses like they were schoolboy jinxes.

Caffrey Burke’s laughter filled his mind. *You’re a pirate, love. Maybe you should try not fighting fair?*

He fell to the ground to escape a violently-red streak.

*Christ, that was a Crucio!*

*Okay then. Don’t fight fair.*

Harry managed to quickly cast an overpowered stone-softening spell—recommend by *Tweeny Twig’s* for reshaping stone walls—onto the street in front of the Death Eater, but had to scrabble to block an incoming neon-pink curse whose wash reeked of acid.

Meanwhile, his opponent had erected a rotating golden shield designed to protect all vital areas of his body.

But, Harry knew, such a shield didn’t cover all the way to a person’s feet.

*Thank for teaching me that one, Ab.*

*“Flagellum Ignis!”* With a shout he sent his Fire Whip at the man’s ankle. The flaming cord wrapped around it and Harry pulled.

The Death Eater cried out and fell forwards onto the part of the street that Harry had softened, his body sinking into cobblestones that now had the consistency of wet cement. His face, however, struck hard pavement. With a sharp crack his mask shattered.

“Well, holy fuck,” Harry panted, staring at bloodied pale skin and disheveled blond hair. “That you, Malfoy?”

A twenty-something Lucius Malfoy glared up at Harry as he foundered helplessly to drag himself out of the stone quagmire.

*Guess he always was a worthless piece of shit.*

“The big battle’s over by Gringotts, Lucius,” he grinned. “Did you get lost?”

The blond hissed but used Harry’s distraction to slip a hand inside the collar of his robes. Before Harry could even blink Malfoy had portkeyed away.

*Oh well done there, lad.* Ab’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

*Dammit! So bloody stupid. Did I seriously just lose Lucius Malfoy because I was too busy taking the piss out of him?*

Footsteps sounded behind him and he suddenly remembered he wasn’t alone. The two-man team had apparently bested their last opponents and seemed no worse for wear—

*Oh. Huh.*

His mouth hung open in a way that surely had to look ridiculous.

Fabian and Gideon Prewett approached him, the former grinning broadly, the latter looking at the glamoured Harry with a more guarded expression.
“Not bad, mate, ha!” Fabian pumped his fist in the air. “But was that a bloody construction spell you used on the street? Brilliant!”

Gideon did not smile.

*I’m glamoured. Be normal.* He swallowed the flock of questions that fluttered on the tip of his tongue. “Uh, thanks. You two are okay, then?”

Both had cuts and burns, though they raised their wands when Harry moved to tend them.

“Whoa—don’t worry. I’m not bad at healing. See?” He waved his wand and muttered an incantation over the laceration in his side, which had just started to throb as his adrenaline ebbed.

Fabian shrugged after seeing Harry’s skin neatly fuse back together. “Have at it, mate, but be quick. We want to get to Gringotts.”

A few moments later and the worst of the brothers’ injuries were healed.

“Let’s move,” Gideon muttered.

The trio made their way onwards towards the growing din of the battle, the brothers keeping Harry in front of him. He silently approved their decision. *They don’t know they know me.*

As they drew nearer to Gringotts, a blast of frigid air seized Knockturn and a puddle of water crackled out a warning as it froze.

Lily Potter’s screams suddenly shattered into Harry’s mind.

–*Not Harry, please no, take me*–

He managed to straighten his back and looked around in mounting panic. Both Prewetts were trying not to double over.

“Wha—what is this?” Fabian choked out, Gideon heaving rattling breaths beside him.

–*Take Harry and run!*–

–*Ab? Hey. Get up, Ab*–

–*Stand aside, you silly girl*–

–*Get up, Ab. Please?*–

Harry clamped his eyes closed as his parents died again, as he found Ab’s body again. The cold was surrounding him, attacking him, digging its way into him.…

“Deh—*Dementors*,” he finally gasped. Looking overhead, his eyes tracked a massive black shadow barreling towards Diagon. “‘S gotta be.”

Gideon’s harsh gasps punctuated the unnatural silence. *Jesus, I can’t even hear the battle anymore.*

“Oh *God*, this is…” Fabian moaned, unable to finish the thought.

“Yeah. Yeah, I know. This is…this is really bad.” Harry struggled to calm down and get himself ready to fight. The cloud, however, passed above them, and the Dementors’ effects were rapidly weakening. “Oh hell, they’re going to incapacitate everyone fighting down there.”
He had to control his breathing. *I can’t let this happen.*

“Either of you know the Patronus charm?”

Gideon shook his head.

“Always meant to learn it but…” Fabian trailed off.

“Okay,” he gulped. “Okay. I can do it. But I need one of you to go and try to see where they are. The other I need to stay here and watch my back.”

“I’ll go. You stay,” Fabian said to his brother and moved down Knockturn on silent feet.

Harry closed his eyes.

*I’ve driven off tonnes of Dementors before, and I was only thirteen then. I just have to focus. Ab told me how to cast multiple patronuses. But if I can’t do it, one should at least help some.*

*Happy thoughts.*

*Happy memories.*

Images of Ab, Pel, the Head, and the Dearboms unfolded in his mind. Hagrid, Poppy, and Filch. The feeling of the Caribbean wind in his hair. The press of Gideon’s leg against his own.

Salt spray, the tang of mead, Hogsmeade in autumn.

A warm glow filled him.

*This is my life now.*

He smiled and opened his eyes.

“I can’t see them—I can’t see Dementors anywhere! But damn if I can’t feel the bastards,” Fabian called in a loud whisper as he jogged back.

“That’s okay, it’s okay. We’ve got to get as close as possible. I can cast the spell, you two cover me, yeah?”

Fabian nodded and elbowed Gideon, who nodded brusquely.

The walk up the rest of the deserted alley was far too short. In moments they were looking out on a raging battle in the small plaza in front of the bank, but the Death Eaters were obviously gaining the upper hand as the defenders wavered under the crippling effects of the still-unseen Dementors.

Willing himself to ignore the chill, Harry closed his eyes.

The glow was still there.

*Deep breath.*

*Please.*

... 

*“Expecto Patronos!”*
Harry’s world narrowed to his own heartbeat just before a bone-deep thrum of power rumbled through him.

Three colossal wandering albatrosses erupted from his wand and wheeled into the square under the power of a single beat of their wings. Their silvery blaze flooded the darkness, drowning the flashing reds and greens of other spells in its wake.

As one, the defenders rallied under the huge patronuses, while smaller shining animals started appearing scattered throughout the battle. One loud baritone rose over the din, “Keep fighting, mates, keeping fighting!”

Harry, however, only heard the keening cry from one of his albatrosses, and he understood its confusion. They can’t find the Dementors.

It doesn’t matter! Just help them! Keep flying!

The birds soared, ducking and whirling through spellfire that could not touch them, leaving renewed hope in their wakes even as the effects of what had to be at least a hundred unseen Dementors attempted to ravage the souls of the defenders.

Harry held onto his wand with both hands like he had once held it in a graveyard in another world, with pure desperation and an absolute commitment not to let go, not to fail. The edges of his vision blurred until he could only see the scene directly in front of him, dotted with chaotic pinpricks of darkest black and glowing white. I have to keep at this. They can’t fight with the Dementors attacking their spirits.

But he was faltering under the massive drain on his energy that came with maintaining such a spell for more than a few moments.

An arm reached across his chest and held him steady.

Just keep flying.

Then the crowd before him parted and he glimpsed colors other than black and white. A flash of red, a few slivers of brown, a shock of golden yellow.

Harry desperately tried to focus as he realized that he’d spied his parents and the Longbottoms in the distance, all dueling furiously with an emaciated figure swathed in a robe so impossibly black that it seemed like a man-shaped void in reality.

Voldemort, his mind whispered before his stomach sank.

Oh God. Mum and Dad—and Alice and Frank—they’re dueling Voldemort. Oh God.

Fear roiled through him and the voices of his own parents played on a gruesome loop once more.

–Please no, take me–

–Take Harry and run!–

–Avada Kedvada!–

The albatrosses had flickered and fizzled out of existence.

He slumped back, eyes wide, as the parents in his mind kept dying and their counterparts kept battling the Dark Lord.
They were losing.

“NO!”

He wanted to run and join the fight, to save them, but his legs wouldn’t work correctly and the strong arm held him back.

No! Fuck this. Fuck all this! They’re still alive, they still have a chance!

It felt like his heart was trying to beat its way free from his chest.

*Deep breath, dammit. Deep breath!*

He shut his eyes and forced his mind to do his bidding. *Think.*

Images of an imagined life with Lily and James, with his own *mum and dad*, flashed across his mind.

*Please, one more time.*

Like in his third year, he later couldn’t really remember making the conscious choice to act. He just knew that people who mattered—people he had *lost*—were in danger of being lost again.

*“Expecto patronum.”*

His voice was only a whisper, but the right emotions were there, even if his body was gasping that it couldn’t do any more.

Prongs burst from his wand.

*“Save them. Please. Somehow,” he gasped.*

The stag shook its antlers and galloped into the battle. It ran on legs faster than nature allowed, becoming little more than a silver blur streaking through the frozen London street. Neither Lily nor James, nor Alice and Frank, seemed to notice it racing behind them.

But Voldemort did.

Prongs drew the Dark Lord’s attention away from his attackers only for a moment, but in that moment Harry could have sworn he saw multiple spells crash into Riddle.

And then Prongs was gone, Harry’s wand hanging uselessly at this side. His vision swirled into a nauseating, kaleidoscopic spin and he swayed, not quite unconscious, but so bloody *tired* he couldn’t manage to do anything as he leaned back into the body behind him.

Broken voices cut their way through the silence in his head.

*“—ly shit, did that just happen?! Damn, Harry…”*  
*“…get him out of here.”*  
*“I’ll stay…over…report...”*  
*“...tell Dumbledore…come on, we’re going.”*

There was a horrible suffocating sensation and Harry realised he was being Apparated.
“No…”

“No… Shut it. You’re done for the night.”

Harry blinked and Gideon Prewett’s face swam into focus. They were standing on a stoop, the Hog’s Head a bit down the street.

“Whah?”

Gideon’s eyes bored into him. “I can’t take you to the Head like this, unless you want everyone to know you were in the battle. You can go home tomorrow. I’ll send a note to Guin.”

He nodded dumbly. “Kay…Wait—how? Glamour…”

The redhead snorted. “Dropped during your first Patronus charm.”

“Oh…Potter, Evans, the others. Okay?”

“Yeah, looked like it. Fabe’s waiting to meet with them and the others.”

A surge of relief flooded through him as Gideon helped him inside Prewett’s Prodigious Clocks and up the back staircase to what had to be the brothers’ apartment. Harry blearily eyed the couch but the other man kept him walking into one of the bedrooms.

As the door shut behind them, Gideon whirled around, his gray eyes flashing.

“What the hell were you thinking? That was mental!”

Harry cast about blankly for something to say, but his mind was fuzzy and he felt like he was viewing the scene from far away. Really tired. Wow. He looked over at Gideon, who glared furiously back.

Oh.

Oh, he looks hot when he’s angry.

“Well? Come on, Harry! Say something.”

Huh.

Yeah, he’s right.

I should say something.

So he said something.

“I like you.”

Gideon shut his mouth with an audible clack of teeth.

Harry figured he should probably say more.

“I really like you.”

The other man shook his head in rapid little jerks. “Well—what? That’s—that’s just beside the point! I mean… Merlin, Harry—you can’t just go and say—seriously?”
He shrugged, which only seemed to irritate Gideon more.

“You’re—I—this is hardly the time—” He threw up his hands in frustration. “Oh, the hell with it all!”

Harry didn’t have time to cotton on to what was happening—Gideon wasn’t making a lot of sense tonight either—before one hand slipped around his waist and another grasped the back of his head. Making a raw sound in his throat that the younger wizard couldn’t fathom, Gideon kissed him.

Oh.

Well alright then.

Muscle-control was rather beyond him at this point and Harry was fleetingly concerned that his kissing was sub-par, but the arm that pulled their bodies together and the hand entwined in his hair—not to mention the press of Gideon’s lips and his tongue in Harry’s mouth—more than made up for any worries he might have had if he could think straight.

Oh wow.

He felt himself losing his balance, but that was totally okay because Gideon seemed to be doing well enough in that regard by himself, so Harry leaned into the kiss with the last vestiges of his energy.

Soon enough—too soon—Gideon pulled back.

The redhead started saying something about how he probably shouldn’t have done that since Harry was obviously exhausted, but Harry decided to concentrate instead on the electric tingles lingering on his lips.

“Oh…Oh, I really like you,” he managed before weariness overtook him completely and he slumped back onto the bed behind him.

The last thing he heard was Gideon murmur something that was probably brilliant.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Multiple patronuses: In *OotP*, McGonagall casts multiple patronus messengers. I figure multiple patronuses thus can also be used for the spell’s original purpose. For the spell I just used the pluralized Latin form.

Note: The phrase “fields of mud, blood, and bone” in the first scene is inspired by the lyrics to Bruce Springsteen’s “Devils & Dust” (copyright 2005). It’s a damn fine song, and actually sets a fitting, if very American, tone for the battles of the Nines, though I didn’t think of it specifically until the rewrite stage.

Coming up next on *The Second String*: we hear about the aftermath of the battle and Harry finally starts taking care of some long overdue business in Chapter 27, whose title I won’t name as it contains some obvious spoilers.

And finally, huge thanks to Averagefish for beta-ing this chapter up to the battle in
Knockturn. If the quality drops off significantly about halfway through, that’s all on me.
Cock, Bird, and Snake

Chapter Notes

In my imagination the part of Rooster #2 is played by Hei-Hei of *Moana* fame. I was planning out the rooster scene last Easter while some of my nieces and nephews watched the movie, and the visual wouldn’t leave me alone.

This chapter begins with one explicit (but pretty tame) scene and then one scene that includes sexual nudity. If you'd prefer it, the version of this story on fanfiction.net does not include these scenes (but includes a brief summary of them) before moving into the rest of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXVII. Cock, Bird, and Snake

23 December, 1978

Harry’s eyes snapped open, his mind fully alert and his body buzzing with a pleasant thrum of energy.

Feeling around in the darkness, he found his wand laying next to him on a pillow.

*Huh. Am I on an actual bed?* He shifted uncomfortably. Granted, the blankets he was cocooned in were lovely and warm, but the bed itself was far more giving than the hay bed to which he’d become accustomed.

*Where am—*

Before he could even finish the question, his mind flashed through images of the battle in Diagon, Voldemort, his parents, and—*Holy shite. Tell me the snogging-Gideon part wasn’t a dream!*

A quick *Lumos* revealed a cozy bedroom dominated by the bed in which he was laying, a large cupboard, and a squat leather armchair perched near the bed. A figure with red hair was curled awkwardly in it under a flannel blanket.

*Yes! Not a dream!*

“Gideon? Gideon?” he whispered, his pulse thudding. “Gideon!”

The man grumbled inarticulately as he blinked his eyes open.

“Harry? It’s, what—” He cast a charm to light the few candles in the room and turned bleary eyes to the nearest clock. “Just gone three in the morning. You should be asleep.”

“I—” *I have no idea what to say. What was I thinking, waking him up!* “I’m not tired…Um, thanks for, you know, bringing me back and all.”

“Well I wasn’t going to just leave you there.” Gideon awkwardly picked at his blanket. “So…are you feeling well?”
“Oh. Yeah, I’m fine. I feel great, actually.”

“You feel great?” The man’s sudden glare sharply reminded Harry of his sister’s identity. “Well that’s bloody lucky, you—you—! What the hell were you thinking holding onto a spell like that for so long? You could have died! You could have been seen by Voldemort! Merlin, I thought my heart was going to stop!”

“But I had to! The Dementors were affecting everyone and I didn’t know what else to do! I couldn’t just let—”

“I know that,” Gideon snapped and then sighed before repeating himself in a much quieter voice that had lost the traces of Molly Weasley. “I do know that. Scared the hell out of me is all. Berk.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Harry bit his lip and fidgeted. Neither of them seemed to know what else to say.

Eventually, he couldn’t take the silence and snuck a glance at the redhead, who met his gaze with eyes that glinted in the weak candlelight. When Gideon finally opened his mouth to speak, Harry’s breath quickened.

“I like you too.”

Warmth blossomed in his belly.

The serious look on Gideon’s face stopped Harry from grinning like a bloody idiot. Instead he stared back, his entire body taut with nervous anticipation. “Good then.”

A ticking clock measured the silence as the room held its breath.

With a whisper Gideon’s blanket slid to the floor as he moved over to the bed and pulled Harry into a kiss.

Yes!

They were both clumsy with sleep, but Harry couldn’t have cared less. Maybe it was the stress of the battle, or his inexperience, or the thrill of finally getting a response from Gideon, or even just being seventeen and so bloody horny all the time, but his thoughts skidded to a stop save for a crowing voice alternating between cries of triumph and demands for more of this, more of this.

Gideon’s fingers raked through Harry’s hair while he grasped the small of his back, pulling them closer together, limbs twining with limbs.

This…this is so much more than a snog, good goddamn…

Harry abandoned himself to the sensation of body against body, to the rough tickle of the man’s beard on his skin.

When he instinctively bucked his hips forwards as Gideon deepened the kiss, he went from being mortified—oh my God, I can’t believe I did that—to being very glad as the redhead made a low noise in this throat and pressed him down into the bed. A leg slung over his hips and then Gideon was leaning in once more, snagging Harry’s mouth in a crushing kiss that was all teeth and gasps and stolen breaths.

Holy bloody fucking hell I cannot believe—

Giddy with the amazing feeling of Gideon’s solid weight blanketing him, Harry arched up and
moved his mouth to the hollow of the other man’s throat as a hand cupped his arse, kneading into it with bruising strokes.

“Oh fuck,” he gasped, his skin burning to leap off his body and scrabble to get more, closer, more.

He felt the shiver run through Gideon’s body and the redhead sat back on his heels.

Harry looked up at the man who was staring down at him.

“What? What is it?”

Without breaking eye contact, his breath coming in sharp little pants, Gideon slowly unbuttoned Harry’s shirt and slid it down his shoulders. One of his hands moved to tweak a nipple, a fingernail digging in just enough to elicit a low groan.

For a just moment Harry wondered if they were moving a bit faster than they should be, but the frenzied, demanding voice drowned out such feeble concerns.

*More of this!*

“Alright, alright,” Gideon choked out with a laugh that was more a gasp, and Harry realised he must have said that last thought out loud. He dipped his thumbs below the waistband of Harry’s trousers and, with a hesitant look that belied the boldness of his touch, undid the button.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Oh, very good idea.”

A smile curling on his lips, Gideon made short work of the rest of Harry’s trousers, leaving him in nothing but his pants.

“Hell, Harry,” he murmured and traced the outline of Harry’s shaft with his thumb as it strained against the fabric of his underwear. “And these?”

Harry gave him a look that clearly asked *Are you an idiot?* and ground himself against Gideon’s hand.

A moment later he was naked for the first time in the bed of someone he desired.

Gideon’s eyes never let him as his hands started smoothing over Harry’s dips and edges, mapping out his body with a maddening restraint. Under the strength of that gaze, Harry felt raw and more than a little exposed, but strangely didn’t mind at all.

Finally Gideon moved a hand nearer the area Harry most wanted it to go. *Oh yes, please!* The callouses on the other man’s fingers caught against the sensitive skin of his bollocks just right when he rolled them in his palms.

Gideon’s other hand ghosted up the cleft in his arse.

The curl of desire roared through his body.

_Jesus Merlin Christ, he hasn’t even touched my cock yet,* Harry realized as he launched himself up for a kiss as needy as it was ungainly. With sudden clarity it hit him that *I really am gay and this is brilliant.*

His moan little more than a ragged breath, Gideon pulled back and started clawing at his own clothing.
Harry reached up to help, but that only caused a tangle of arms and hands, made all the more confused by the two pairs of enthusiastically-bucking hips that were fighting to stay in contact.

“Goddamn bloody—hell with this,” he sputtered frantically. “Fuck it—Accio buttons!”

At once all the buttons from Gideon’s shirt and trousers ripped themselves free and zoomed straight into Harry, sending him flailing onto his back and cursing with pain from the blossoming welts on his face and chest.

*Oh, well done. Very smooth.*


“I’m fine, fine…. And why are you still dressed?” Harry panted out with a breathy laugh. Sure, the welts stung, but there were far more interesting things happening here.

A concerned frown stole over Gideon’s features even as he shucked off his clothing. “Look—we don’t have to do anything, you know. I mean we haven’t—we don’t really—and you haven’t, have you?…. Just, are you sure?”

For just a moment, anxieties about never having done any of this with a man and having no idea how to do it well bubbled up in Harry’s mind, but suddenly the voice of Oliver Wood, of all people, bellowed an exuberant *Go, Go Gryffindors!* cheer in his head.

Buoyed by Woods’ ludicrous but enthusiastic support, Harry swatted away his niggling worries. A frustrated growl rumbled low in his chest as his cock hardened to the point of pain. “Are you trying to *kill* me over here? *Merlin*, yes, Gideon!”

Decisive action was clearly required.

Heart pounding a tattoo against his chest, he rolled over atop the larger body, his skin on fire as his cock dragged across Gideon’s. “I’m not a virgin, but I haven’t done this with a man. But I…” A roll of his hips had him grinding hard against the other man, his breath coming in shaking gasps. “…I would really, *really* like to with you. Kay?”

Gideon’s grin grew to match Harry’s. “Well okay, then.”

xoxoxox

Harry woke the next morning to confusion—*where am I, what’s going on, and why the hell does my arse hurt so much*—which melted into thrilled astonishment when he recalled the identity of the firm, warm pillow that pressed against his back.

*I’m in Gideon’s bed.*

*I’m naked in Gideon’s bed.*

His face split into a goofy smile despite the thudding pangs that were coming from the literal pain in his arse.

*Yes!*

“*Sex isn’t supposed to be nice, Harry,*” Caff Burke’s voice reminded him. Harry nodded slowly.

*Hell yes, Cap’n. That was so much better than ‘nice.’*
His smile faltered.

*We are going to be doing that again…Right?*

Like ants to a picnic, a small army of insecurities began nibbling at him. *I mean, I can’t have been great…but…God, what if he thinks it was a mistake? What if I came on too strong and scared him away? What if—*

His fretting was cut short by movement behind him. Gideon’s arm lazily reached over, hooking low around Harry’s waist. “G’mornin’,” the redhead mumbled and nestled closer.

“Um. Hi there.”

Gideon stilled.

*Hi there? Hi there!? Seriously?*

“So, er…that was all okay, right? I mean, did I mess up anything or should I have—” *Oh my God, please shut up, please shut up….*

Harry’s babbling was mercifully interrupted by the brush of whiskers on his skin as the other man kissed his back.

“You worry too much,” Gideon murmured sleepily, curling his arm more tightly around him.

The smile that he knew looked ridiculously silly returned. He settled back into Gideon, enjoying the feeling of his backside resting against the man’s frontside.

Slipping back into a lazy doze, Harry finally woke up when his cock, already half-hard in its standard salute to the morning, roused itself fully.

As it nudged against the hand around his waist, Gideon drew in a sharp breath and pulled back a few inches. “Oh, *really* nice idea. Yeah…” He pulled the hair out of his eyes, a tremble shuddering through his body. “But I’m thinking we need to get up and find out about the rest of the battle?”

Opening his eyes and stretching, Harry groaned, partially in disappointment, partially in relief. *Jesus, someone really should have told me I would be this sore afterwards. Christ. “Fine,” he yawned. “Wait—you did let Guin and Doc know I was here, right?”*

“Yeah. But you’d better check in with them soon. She was probably worried.”

With a sigh Harry left the warm nest he’d made in the bed, observing that at some point he’d stolen most of the covers from Gideon. After mulling over his options he hit himself with a cleaning charm that would hold him until he had a shower, and gingerly rose to find his clothing.

How far could my *pants have gotten to, really?* he wondered, only to turn and find Gideon staring at him with hooded eyes.

His prick noticed Gideon noticing him and perked up with renewed interest. “Oh stop looking at me like that! If you don’t stop, this’ll just get worse, you know,” he snapped without any real venom.

Gideon grinned.

By the time Harry had located all his clothing, the redhead had gotten out of bed and this time it was Harry’s turn to stare. *I didn’t have a chance last night to look at him properly, so really I deserve a proper ogling.*
The man was definitely worth ogling, he concluded immediately. He was as tall as Bill Weasley was in his own world, but more solidly built with a healthy covering of freckles. *Huh. I didn’t realize freckles were sexy.* And his backside…well, Harry had seen plenty of other boys’ bums at Hogwarts, but this was the first time he’d gotten to look at one in a sexual way. He stared at the lovely spot where Gideon’s cheeks curved up from his thighs…*What's the right adjective for nice, healthy arses?* He bit his lip, eyes sparkling, as he settled on *bloody wonderful* until he thought of something better.

The redhead turned and quirked an eyebrow. “Are you going to stare at me much longer?”

“Well, I’d really like to, yes,” Harry said without thinking, his attention still on riddling out appropriate arse descriptions.

Gideon chucked a pillow at him.

They found a grumpy Fabian hunched over the kitchen table in the upstairs apartment, clutching a steaming mug of tea and rubbing red eyes.

“Out late catching up with the…um…others about the battle. Harry, breakfast’s on you at your place because *silencing charms would have been polite.*”

Gideon shrugged. “We were concerned with other things and you’ve got a wand. Deal with it.”

Meanwhile, Harry was being burned alive by the violent blush suffusing his cheeks. *Oh my God. Someone heard me having sex.*

“Well, I had to keep an ear out in case the alarms on the shop went off, didn’t I?” Smirking, Fabian shook his head and handed a vial to Harry. “Have a pain potion before we go. Sounded like you’d need it.”

His face surely would catch on fire at any minute.

Potion gulped down with a grimace and not a little gratitude, the trio trudged over to the Head to find Guin, Doc, and, surprisingly, Pel sitting down to full English breakfasts in the public room.

Guin took one look at Harry’s mussed hair, flushed face, and irrepressible smile and started sniggering. “About time!”

Doc and Pel leaned forward, their expression intent. “Yesterday or today?” Doc asked.

“Huh?”

Pel let out a breath. “He means, did you two finally hop into bed together last night or this morning?”

As Harry sputtered and Gideon gaped, Fabian slipped into an empty seat and began spooning out beans onto a plate. “Technically it was early this morning,” he answered smoothly. “Why?”

Doc and Guin groaned as Pel grinned triumphantly. “That’ll be the pot for me then!”

*Oh shite, forgot about that.*

“You two just couldn’t get to it a few hours earlier, could you?” Doc groused. “We could’a used that money.”
Harry’s glare would have been much more successful if he weren’t simultaneously trying not to grin like an idiot and flushing a deep red.

Fabian started laughing. “You were betting on these two? Bad form, that is—”

Thank you, Fabian. At least one person here respec—

“—not letting the brother in on the action!”

Git.

Noticing the angry welts on Harry’s face, Guin sobered immediately. “Oh, hell, what happened to your face? Are those from the battle?”

“Nope,” Fabian cut in with a pop of the ‘p.’ “That’s from him summoning all of dear ol’ Gid’s buttons off his clothes. Very sexy, that was.”

The table erupted into laughter.

Harry’s jaw dropped. “How did you—"

“Like I said, mate, silencing charms are a good thing. Though that bit was definitely my favorite part.” Fabian snickered unapologetically as Gideon scowled on Harry’s behalf.

Is this how the morning after is supposed to be? It’s very…odd. Harry mused some time later, munching on some bacon and glancing around at the unexpected breakfast party. But it’s kind of nice.

“Wait, Pel—why are you here this early in the morning?” he asked, suddenly remembering that the former solicitor was typically not a morning person.

The light-hearted mood in the pub at once turned serious. “Merlin, Harry, after last night, I had to make sure you were okay,” Pel shot back. “Doc and Guin let me spend the night in a guest room—an’ thanks for that.”


VICTORY IN DIAGON! the headline screamed.

Harry shivered at the massive picture playing on a loop underneath it. Voldemort, cloaked and face hidden on the steps of Gringotts, dominated the center, dueling at lightning speeds with his parents’ counterparts and the Longbottoms. At one point the glow of a patronus illuminated Lily and James’ faces with a ghostly light.

“It says that Volde—He attacked, no one knows exactly why, with a few dozen Death Eaters, but that the ‘heroic actions of Aurors and civilians thwarted him and led to his eventual retreat’ from the Alley.” Doc explained. “They report the casualties at 19 Aurors and civilians, and 33 Death Eaters, so it’s being called a ‘victory’.”

Harry quickly flipped through the paper to scan the casualty list and sighed in relief. He vaguely recognized some of the surnames, but no one he actually knew had died, though Mad-Eye Moody was listed in “critical condition.”
“So, Prewetts, care to tell us what happened for real? We know the Order was called in to fight.” Doc asked bluntly.

The two redheads stiffened immediately. “How do you know about—” Fabian began.

“We were Order members for awhile, before you two joined,” Doc said dismissively. “And Harry set up something with Dumbledore to share information we hear in the pub. The way Gideon high-tailed it out when Black showed up made it pretty obvious that he was a member.”

Harry and Gideon avoided each other’s eyes, uncomfortably aware that neither had been forthcoming with the other.

Has he…Is he like Dung Fletcher was? Dumbledore’s spy in the pub?

Images of Gideon and Fabian at the Head, sometimes with others (Order members?) whom Harry didn’t recognize, flew through his mind and he bristled.

But…

Harry bit his lip. It wasn’t like he wasn’t spying for Dumbledore as well.

A jittery niggle wormed its way through his stomach.

I hate this war.

Under the table, a hand found its way to Harry’s thigh and squeezed it lightly.

But…I just believe he’s a good man. He glanced at Gideon with a small smile and gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

Fabian sighed. “Honestly, that rag’s pretty much got the right of it for once. Battle was centered in Gringotts’ plaza, though the three of us were fighting stragglers in Knockturn for most of it. Voldemort showed up at some point, and Potter, Evans, and the Longbottoms fought him while everyone else took on the Death Eaters.”

“What about the Dementors?” Guin cut in.

There was no disguising the shiver in Fabian’s voice. “We never saw them—no one did, as far as we can tell—but everyone definitely felt them. Merlin.” The hand on Harry’s thigh tightened its grasp. “Then Harry here filled the whole plaza with patronuses. Bloody brilliant, it was.”

Doc’s teacup met the table with a clank. “That was you? The Prophet mentioned some giant patronus birds showing up and helping turn the tide, but they didn’t know the caster’s identity. They’re saying they’ll pay up to a hundred galleons for information about him!”

Harry nibbled at his toast. “Yeah, well, let’s just keep it quiet that it was me, okay? I don’t need that kind of foolishness.”

Pel grunted his agreement. “Bloody good way to get you an’ yours targeted.”

“Er…well, I did tell Dumbledore before the Order meeting after the battle,” Fabian admitted. “But it was just him. It didn’t come up during the debriefing with the others.”

Oh lovely.

Harry shook his head wearily. “Fine. Anyway what happened next?”
The elder Prewett sat back in his chair. “Not much, really. Your second patronus distracted Him, and Potter, Evans, and the Longbottoms got in a few hits. Weird thing was that the spells didn’t seem to actually hurt him, but he Disapparated anyway. The Death Eaters who could followed. People were really nervous that the Dementors would finally show themselves and attack, but they didn’t. Dumbledore thinks that He had some sort of plan involving them but couldn’t get to it or something. Other than that, we don’t even know why He attacked in the first place.”

Gideon looked between his brother and Doc with an odd expression. “Why do you all keep referring to Voldemort as Him?”

Fabian shuddered. “Damn, Gid, don’t say the name!” He shook his head at Harry’s incredulous expression. “Oh come on, you felt the magic last night! Sure the Dementors probably made it worse, but still…” He looked at Guin. “It was horrible beyond anything I’ve ever felt before. Just…just not right, y’know?”

Harry blinked. He didn’t seem that different, honestly. I mean, it was horrible and all, but I wasn’t really all that close and I did have my mind on other things….

Maybe I’ve just gotten used to the way Voldemort feels, he concluded.

“Lots of people close to the main battle said the same thing in the Prophet,” Doc added. “Word’s getting around about it, and everyone’s thinking it’s a good idea to avoid saying his name.” When Harry made to protest, he shook his head. “Not the first time this has happened, mate. Stories say that some dark wizards way back got so powerful that they could tell when people said their names, and would show up a moment later to murder them. Some said it was some sort of taboo spell, some that they were just that bloody powerful. Either way, people are afraid He’s like that, so better to be safe than sorry, I guess.”

Oh bloody hell. They’re all going to start calling him ‘You-Know-Who,’ aren’t they?

“Too right.” Fabian wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood. “Thanks for breakfast, but Gid and I should get over to my sister’s. I sent her an owl saying we were okay, but we won’t hear the end of it if she doesn’t get to check us over in person.”

Fabian’s words smacked into Harry like a bludger.

Holy shite.

I had sex with Molly Weasley’s brother.

. . .

Oh. My. God.

I had sex with Ron’s uncle.

He barely contained a hysterical giggle as that realization sunk in, but was called back to reality when Gideon’s hand moved to his back.

“I’ll see you later?” The man asked, gray eyes intent on Harry’s face. “Soon?”

Don’t grin like an idiot…don’t grin like an idiot…

He grinned. “Of course.”
They stayed in that pose for a few beats longer than was strictly proper, Harry’s arms fidgeting with uncertainty. *Are we supposed to kiss now? In front of people? Are there rules for this?*

Gideon briefly ran his thumb over Harry’s neck. The little hairs on his scruff shivered. “Good then.”

The four who remained in the pub finished their breakfasts in a companionable silence. Guin mentioned that Myrtle was less than thrilled with him for fighting in the wizarding world and expected a report later that day. Resigned to an afternoon of enduring the petite general’s scathing criticism, Harry tried to prepare himself by reviewing the battle.

His mind proved most uncooperative, stubbornly returning to the delicious, heady feel of Gideon’s hands on him, the way his weight felt atop him, the way he had *thrust*—

“So, Gideon look as nice under his robes as I’m guessing he does?” Guin asked conversationally, pulling Harry sharply out of his memories.

Doc threw a bit of toast at her. “Oi, woman, I’m right here!”

“Quite,” Harry managed to respond with exaggerated dignity as the others laughed.

“You ready for a real bedroom then, Harry?” Doc asked as he gulped down the last of his tea.

His bright mood grayed. *No! I want things to be like they used to be, only with Gideon as well!* But…but Ab’s gone. And things aren’t ever going to be like they used to be again.

That’s just the way it is.

... 

*Maybe it’s time.*

“Yeah, okay. I’ll, uh, I’ll take Ab’s old room. I don’t want…I don’t want other people sleeping there, really.” He swallowed hard. “But maybe I’ll change it around some? I don’t want to get rid of any of his stuff,” Harry rushed on, “but I don’t feel right just, y’know, living in his room as he had it.”

“Of course, of course, I figured you’d feel that way,” Guin agreed before briskly clapping her hands. “Now, I’ve drawn up a few ideas, let me just find my notes….” She rummaged in a drawer behind the bar and pulled out a binder as thick as the books Hermione used to cart around. “So, I was thinking that you might like a pale green and gold scheme set against some dark woods? No? Well, they would complement your coloring. *Very* fetching in candlelight.”

Harry stared at her blankly and she went back to thumbing through the binder. “Fine, fine...oh! Perhaps something bold but traditional. Picotee blue and chocolate, say, accented with white? I’ve got some swatches here somewhere—”

He looked helplessly at Pel and Doc, who were slowly backing away.

“Pico-what blue? What the hell—?”


xoxoxox

1 January, 1979
While Voldemort seemed to be taking a break for the holidays, New Year’s Day saw Harry perched on the bed in Ab’s—his—new-old bedroom using the post-holiday slump to go over The Plan once last time.

To his great relief, the first Christmas at the Head after Ab’s death had come and gone without too much fanfare. True, the regulars had taken to casting occasional glances full of poorly-concealed concern his way, and Guin had made treacle tart more often than necessary, but the pain in his chest remained a dull, melancholy throb. A bearable, if ever-present, hurt.

Guin had taken to redecorating as a Christmas present with unbridled enthusiasm that resulted in the warm, comfortable room in which he now sat. Most of Ab’s personal items had been put in storage, though important pieces had found homes elsewhere in the Head. A handsome clock whose face mirrored the weather—a Christmas gift from Gideon inspired by the ceiling of the Great Hall—now held pride of place on Harry’s bureau next to the statue of Goat he had once given Ab.

Christmas Day had seen the Head hopping as per usual, and it seemed every hour was punctuated by one patron or another raising a toast in honor of Aberforth Dumbledore. Harry could only blink dumbly when patrons began following their toasts to Ab with toasts to Harry himself.

“The king is dead, long live the king!” One drunken vampire had proclaimed, and the phrase echoed strangely in his head.

Yet by far the oddest and somehow best part of the holiday—aside from the evening that Gideon had snuck away from the Burrow for a brief but heated snogging session in the stable—had been Hagrid. The half-giant had stomped into the Head Christmas evening, his face a thundercloud, and proceeded to berate his godson for not telling him that he was involved in a ‘relationship’ with Gideon Prewett.

“News travels faster outside the school than it does inside it!
And it’s hardly a relationship yet.

Right?

“It’s not that I don’ like the lad, ‘Arry,” he’d said, “But I’m yer godfather! Ye should come to me about stuff like this! S’my job ta give ya advice, right?”

Harry had choked on his beer at the thought of asking Hagrid for tips on the art of buggering.

“He’d better be treatin’ ya right, though. If I hear anythin’ ta the contrary, why I’ll—” A litany of ever more painful-sounding threats culminated in Hagrid’s declaration that he’d feed Gideon’s penis to thestrals.

Remembering a pig’s tail poking out of Dudley’s pajamas, Harry hadn’t been entirely sure that Hagrid’s threats were idle, and prudently decided the man had definitely had enough to drink. A warm, glowing feeling nonetheless came over him when he realized his new godfather took his role so seriously.

Ab would approve.

In fact, he’d underestimated just how seriously the man would take it. Two days later a very confused Gideon had owled to say that Hagrid had stopped by the Burrow for “a friendly chat.” Their talk apparently concluded with more threats against Gideon’s manhood emphasized by jabs of the half-giant’s pink umbrella. The redhead had seemed less amused than Harry, but had nonetheless made sure to ask Harry out on a proper date.
My first date, Harry had grinned to himself after deciding the Yule Ball and an appointment with a prostitute definitely didn’t count.

All in all, the holiday week had been…as good as Harry could hope.

But now wasn’t about friends and family and whatever exactly Gideon was to him.

Now was about The Plan.

In the aftermath of the Battle of Gringotts, as people were calling it, the full horror of Voldemort’s threat to the wizarding world had descended on Harry even as he smiled and took orders at the Head. The unseen army of Dementors—which was all the more terrifying since the Ministry denied that any had been absent from Azkaban during the battle—had forcibly reminded Harry that Tom Riddle had access to more than just one type of destructive creature.

Of course he’d known this, better than anyone, but there had always been something else to concentrate on, something else to distract him from figuring out a way to do the job without being caught.

And, if here were honest with himself, he was terrified.

But fuck it all, Voldemort has access to a great bloody basilisk. If he ever decides to break into the school and bring that thing into a place like Diagon Alley…

The thought of the basilisk unleashed on the public was…Harry didn’t have the words. ‘Catastrophic’ seemed an understatement.

A voice in his mind that sounded suspiciously like Hermione’s kept insisting that he consult with Albus (or Pel, or the Dearborns, or Gideon, or anyone), but it was drowned out again and again by other voices which observed he had no good explanation for knowing about the basilisk or the Chamber of Secrets, let alone for his parseltongue abilities.

The only person I can really explain this to is Pel. And while he’s a great lawyer, he says himself that he’s shit in battle.

... I defeated it alone when I was twelve, I can do it again.

And today was the perfect day for it.

Most students were at home for the holidays, and the Prophet had reported that Dumbledore was set to give a speech on the war at a special New Year’s Day emergency meeting of the Wizengamot. He’d certainly be stuck in London playing politics for hours, leaving Harry time to enact The Plan.

‘The Plan’ hardly deserved the capital letters his mind had conferred upon it, but it was the best he had.

Visit Hagrid. ‘Borrow’ some of his roosters. Hermione’s book said that their cries are fatal to it. Go to the school to visit Poppy and Argus. Sneak away, go down to the Chamber, kill the basilisk, and get out without anyone noticing. If I’m lucky, the roosters’ll do all the work. If I’m not…well, I’ve killed it before.

This’ll be easy.
I’ll be damned.

That was actually easy.

Harry grinned as he made his way to the lavatory he’d always think of as Moaning Myrtle’s.

Sure, he did feel a bit ashamed for stealing—borrowing—two of Hagrid’s roosters. Sure, he did feel a bit ashamed for using meetings with Poppy and Filch to get into the castle. But the matron had loved the bottle of Portuguese elf-made wine he’d given her, and Filch had actually smiled when Harry whispered “Just one more year of this, mate,” as he left his office.

And he was trying to destroy a weapon of mass destruction, so he would only let himself feel a bit ashamed.

A sharp scratch on his back alerted him that one of the Stupefied roosters he had stuffed in a bag and slung over his shoulder was once again coming out of the spell.

Ruddy resilient little bastards, he sighed as he aimed his wand behind him to still the bird with an even more powerful Stupefy.

Turning a corner, everything seemed suddenly not so easy.

“Mr. Aberforth. I wouldn’t have expected to see you wandering through a school which you do not attend.”

Minerva McGonagall looked at him with the unmistakable expression of a teacher who suspected her student was up to no good.

Harry gulped. This was the first time he’d really interacted with his former Head of House—she had never needed his assistance during his service to wizards—but standing in her presence made him feel like he was fourteen again.

You aren’t some misbehaving schoolboy, don’t act like one!

“Ah, happy holidays, Professor,” he smiled. “I’m just coming from a meeting with Poppy. We were pretty busy at the Head these last few days and I wanted to make sure she got her Christmas gift.”

McGonagall’s sharp eyes softened. “Indeed. I had forgotten you had become rather close to her in your time with us.” A curious look crept over her features and Harry just knew she was wondering why he’d never attended Hogwarts in the first place.

“At any rate, Argus told me I could take a walk-through of the castle, you know, for old times’ sake. I find I kinda miss the place,” he added in the manner of a confession. “I’m sorry, should I have checked with you first?”

Good lord, laying it on thick, aren’t I?

The stern teacher studied him for a moment before reaching a decision. “Think nothing of it. Though in the future please refrain from doing so when the school is in session, and do make certain you notify someone other than our caretaker. Good day, then, Mr. Aberforth.”

He wished her the same and went on his way, failing to notice her eyes narrowing as she stared at his back, or her form slowly shrinking into something much smaller.
Harry stood at the door to the Chamber of Secrets. *Okay. This’ll be easy, this’ll be easy...*

Just as he had up in Myrtle’s lavatory, he envisioned the snake on the lock alive and writhing. “*Open,*” he hissed.

The Chamber looked exactly as he had remembered it. At the end, down the long walkway flanked by giant stone snakes rearing up from the water with their mouths agape, was the statue of Salazar Slytherin.

He stepped forwards.

A half-breath later, he knew something was different about the Chamber.

A full breath later, he knew this was *not* going to be easy.

His first step onto the walkway caused a low hum of magic to reverberate off the cavernous room’s stone walls.

*That was—oh hell, that was some sort of tripline.*

He cast his eyes about wildly, wand firmly in hand.

*Of course, that git Tom Riddle would’ve wanted to be sure that his Chamber remained his Chamber. He must have set up booby traps in case someone else managed to get in.*

*And last time...last time he probably had Ginny deactivate them while she was possessed.*

A sudden series of deafening cracks shrieked through the Chamber.

Harry’s jaw dropped as the ten massive serpent statues on either side of the walkway shook off their stony shells and whipped their heads around towards him, fangs bared and bodies coiling up out of the water.

*Oh, you have got to be kidding me.*

*This...this is really not good...*

Before the pair closest to him could strike, he wrenched himself out of his shock and sent a cutting curse at one’s neck and a Flame Whip at the other’s.

The spells bounced off them harmlessly, as though the now flesh-and-blood-looking serpents were still made of the hardest stone.

*Bad, bad, really very bad.*

The one to his right lunged towards him with a snap of its body, and Harry could only think to duck out of its path so that it crashed into the wall behind him. The beast seemed dazed, but Harry was already diving to his right as the other snake followed with the same style of attack.

*The wall, it’s going to hit the wall too if it misses me,* he thought frantically, and barely managed to cast *Tweeny Twig’s* stone-softening spell on the cavern wall. The giant beast slammed into it just as the other one had, but its head sank deeply into the now-pliant stone. Without even stopping to draw breath, Harry petrified the wall itself, effectively trapping the snake’s head within it.
There was no time to bask in the relief that he’d found a temporary solution. The rhumba of serpents from farther down the Chamber were steadily advancing, and the first, having shaken off its daze, was curling ominously towards Harry once again.

He cast a quick shield that would hopefully block the other snakes’ advance for a few seconds and softened the stone floor of the Chamber around the closest serpent.

The effect was immediate. As it sank into the stone like it were a bog, the snake whipped its neck around in wide circles, hissing out furious, broken threats against Harry. Its wild thrashing only made it sink faster.

Breathing heavily, Harry cast a petrification charm on the stone floor once only the tip of the serpent’s mouth was visible above the ground.

Without warning, a sharp, blinding pain flared in his chest and he felt himself fall, the knees of his trousers ripping and the uneven floor bloodying his knees. He gasped as one of the remaining eight snakes, which had apparently battered through his shield, reared back from his body, its teeth leaving galleon-sized holes in his left shoulder.

Harry frantically cast the only spell that occurred to him as he stared up into the beast’s gaping maw.

“Suber Foramini!”

The old bartending spell was one he’d seen Ab cast hundreds of times, and one he now cast nearly every day. A cork, sized perfectly for the job, popped into existence and rammed itself into the serpent’s mouth, effectively gagging it and rendering its teeth harmless.

Harry would have stopped to admire the ludicrousness of the thrashing snake before him, but its seven remaining mates were almost in striking distance.

Have to neutralize them all…

One of the spells Caff Burke favored for calm, uncooperative seas, popped into his mind. The last time he’d used an under-powered version of it, he’d sent a black market potions dealer careening off The Bachelor’s Delight. Time to put a little power into it, then.

“Auster Maximus!”

The South-Wind Spell barreled into the advancing snakes and knocked them back into the water on either side of the walkway, their bodies coiling around each others in writhing knots.

“Glacius Maximus! Glacius Maximus!”

A sudden, startling silence filled the cavern as all the water on both sides froze solid. The only sound was the rattling gasp of one of the snakes, whose head had stayed above the water, and the muffled, angry hissing of the corked serpent, who was hitting its head on the wall in an attempt to dislodge the cork still lodged in its throat.

Panting, Harry regarded the thrashing, gagging snake. Spells still weren’t likely to do anything to it, and softening the stone wall could release the second serpent currently encased within.

I can’t hit it with spells, but I can hit the cork.

What the hell.
He watched in morbid fascination as the cork began to expand. Hisses turned into a racking, desperate rattle as the plug grew beyond the capacity of the beast’s jaw and put unbearable pressure on its skull.

Harry half expected its head to explode or something equally dramatic, but eventually the snake stopped struggling and simply slumped over, its eyes glassy and unseeing. With a flick of his wand, Harry stopped enlarging the cork.

Okay.

So that was…something...

The thought disintegrated as a manic, giddy feeling roared without warning through his veins. At some point he realised that he’d fallen to his knees again, his head thrown back in hysterical laughter.

His giggling only increased when he noticed the gaping puncture wounds from the snake’s fangs in his shoulder. Probably poisoned! he burbled. Figures!...Bloody hot in here too. With a pained shrug of his shoulders his ragged, blood-stained shirt fell to the floor.

Enough of his intelligence managed to surface above his feverish delirium to observe that being poisoned was a bad thing, and reminded him that he had, in fact, planned for such injuries.

Oh yeah! Wow, I’m pretty smart!

Grinning madly, he pulled a small bottle of anti-venom elixir and an even tinier stone from his mokeskin pouch. Tossing back the potion was a simple matter. Swallowing the little bezoar proved far more problematic, especially because he found the whole thing so bloody funny.

He abruptly lost his sense of humor when the potion and bezoar started to purge his system. The next five minutes were devoted to writhing in pain and sicing up next to the corked serpent.

Venom neutralized, his good sense slouched back. Grumbling to himself, he cast a series of healing charms on the puncture wounds that, while certainly not enough to fully treat them, left them well enough to be getting on with.

Right then.

Now all I have to do is actually kill the basilisk.

I should have brought another bezoar.

His rucksack of roosters had been safely dropped near the entrance of the Chamber. He gently removed the two Stupefied roosters, made his way back to the statue, and released them from the spell. Breathing deeply and closing his eyes, he tried to remember the exact words the memory of Tom Riddle had once used.

“Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four.”

As before, the mouth of the Founder opened and the dry sound of scales on stone began to whisper through the chamber. Harry crouched down in a darkened corner.

You’re on, boys. Good luck.

Heedless to their role in the unfolding drama and rather befuddled by their time bespelled in the bag,
the two roosters ambled about mindlessly searching for seed.

Harry realized his horrible, unforgivably stupid mistake a second too late.

The basilisk began coiling out of the mouth just as it once had. One of the roosters shot its head up as it sensed the danger…

And, of course, fell over dead the moment it locked eyes with the great serpent.

_Fuck!_

“Accio rooster!”

Harry desperately caught the other bird as it zoomed towards him and did the only thing that came to mind. Later he would cringe at his split-second decision to cast a spell that would blindfold the now-frantic bird.

His own eyes tightly closed, Harry shooed the terrified rooster back out towards the basilisk.

There was silence, and then a voice Harry had hoped never to hear again.

“Prey…Prey is here…Rip…Tear…Kill …”

_Jesus, Go on! Crow!

…”

Anytime now! Crow, dammit!

He cracked an eye open.

The rooster blindly flopped down on the floor and pecked at its toes.

A moment later and he could have slapped himself.

_Shit, shit! Cocks only crow when the sun’s coming up!_

“Oh for the love of—Accio rooster!” The bird once again shot towards Harry, who caught it, ripped off the blindfold, and turned the thoroughly boggled bird safely away from the approaching basilisk.

He winced as it walked into a wall.

“Bones…blood…”

“Lumos Solem!”

Golden light filled the Chamber of Secrets and finally, blessedly, the rooster cried out to the artificial morning.

The ground shook under Harry’s feet and bits of rock rained down from the ceiling as the massive serpent slammed to the ground, dead.

He blinked and got up on shaky legs.

_I hope I never have to kill this thing again._

“W…Well—well done, rooster! See? Easy. Though I’m really sorry about your mate.”
The bird meandered about on unsteady legs, pecking mindlessly against the stone floor. Harry sighed and *Stupefied* it again.

Ten minutes later, he was levitating himself up the shaft into the girl’s lavatory, clad now in torn denims and a rucksack transfigured into a shirt.

He clambered out of the hole, wand in one hand, unconscious rooster in the other…

…only to come face to face with a gobsmacked Professor McGonagall and Albus Dumbledore.

*Plop. Plop.*

Silence reigned as the pair stared at the limp bird and Harry, who was steadily dripping blood, slime, and Merlin-knew what other nastiness he’d been coated with onto the lavatory floor.

*Plop. Plop.*

“Let’s take this to my office, shall we?” Dumbledore finally murmured.

Harry sighed. “Bugger.”

xoxoxox

It was just as Harry remembered it, down to Fawkes delicately grooming himself on his perch in the corner.

Dumbledore settled behind his desk but stopped McGonagall from taking a chair. “Thank you for alerting me, Minerva, but I believe more will be accomplished if I speak with Mr. Aberforth privately.”

The Transfiguration professor made to protest. A quelling look from the Headmaster, however, saw her departing down the spiral staircase, muttering furiously under her breath.

A fluttering sound and a whisper of wind on his cheek had Harry turning to find Fawkes alighting on the little table next to his chair. The scarlet and golden bird watched him keenly before nudging the sleeve of Harry’s poorly transfigured shirt.

“What’re you on about?” he murmured, bemused.

Fawkes butted his sleeve more insistently and chirped in annoyance. As Harry rolled it up, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

*Does he sense—*

With a croon the bird leaned in and stared at the scar on Harry’s arm, the one which had been made long ago in a different world by Slytherin’s basilisk.

“Er—”

Another cry from Fawkes interrupted him, and Harry started as the phoenix began tugging on the rest of Harry’s rucksack-cum-shirt.

“I do believe he wants you to remove your top, Mr. Aberforth,” Dumbledore observed mildly.

With a shrug, he complied. *Because being half naked in the Headmaster’s office with a bird in my lap isn’t weird at all.*
“Harry!” the headmaster gasped and Fawkes leaned in to peer at the ugly, half-healed puncture wounds in Harry’s chest.

“Oh, I, uh—”

He was saved from coming up with something to say by the quiet sizzle of the phoenix’s tears healing the wounds.

“Oh. Thanks for that.”

Looking at once amused and satisfied, Fawkes flew back to his perch and proceeded to utterly ignore both Dumbledore and Harry.

The Headmaster watched his familiar with a strange expression. “Phoenixes are excellent judges of character, Harry.”

He tried to smile. “Yeah…Um…so you’re probably wondering what I was up to, I guess, right?”

“I admit I was intrigued when my deputy alerted me at the Ministry that you had absconded into the school with two roosters in tow.”

“How did she—!” Harry closed his eyes. “Damn, animagus, right? She changed and smelled them or something?”

Dumbledore’s eyebrows raised. “Exceptionally well reasoned, Harry. And indeed, as school administrators we do believe it necessary to investigate when a shamefaced young man is caught loitering in a girl’s lavatory holding a cock in his hands.”

Harry bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

The headmaster’s eyes twinkled.

_Dumbledore just said that. Dumbledore._

_Is he…is he fucking with me? Holy bloody mother of…_

“Yes,” he managed to choke out. “Understandable, that…So, I was, well I was…uh…” _Think, dammit!_

The older wizard serenely folded his hands together and sent Harry a knowing look. “I’ve worked with young people most of my life, Mr. Aberforth. When it takes one this long to formulate a falsehood, that falsehood tends towards the lamentably transparent.”

_Fuck._

_And we’re back to ‘Mr. Aberforth’ again too._

Harry sighed. The Plan had worked well enough, but he hadn’t thought to come up with a believable explanation should he get caught red-handed. _If only I had the Map I could have—_

He wanted to put his head in his hands. _Fool! I stole it last year. It’s in my pouch. I’ve had it the whole bloody time._

_Goddammit so much._

“Mr. Aberforth? I expect a response.”

The Albus Dumbledore in his original world had never moved that fast, Harry was sure of it. Before he could even blink, the headmaster had launched himself up from the desk and was staring at him with horrified eyes. “What?”

Harry flinched back in his chair. “Whoa! A—a basilisk. In the Chamber of Secrets. Tom Riddle found it when he was a student here and, I dunno, trained it to respond to him as the Heir of Slytherin. After the whole thing he did with the invisible Dementors, I figured it would be best if he didn’t have the basilisk too, so I killed it.” He lamely pointed at the still-Stupefied rooster. “Y’know, cry of a rooster is fatal to them and all.”

Dumbledore sat back slowly, mouth agape. “And why did you not just come to me? Why do this alone? Are you—are you mad, Harry?”

Stomach sinking, he forced himself to meet the man’s eyes. “Well, I—er—I didn’t want to have to tell you how I knew about it, see, and…” I can’t think of a way out of this. He’ll press and press until I give it up anyway. “Honestly, there’s no way you or anyone else could get to the Chamber without me. Well you could with Voldemort, but I don’t he’d be interested in helping, of course…”

*Dammit, stop stalling.*

“And why is that?”

Harry winced. “Because all the passwords are in Parseltongue. Sir.”

It was to Fawkes that Dumbledore glanced sharply. The phoenix continued to pointedly ignore him until Albus turned back to Harry, his shock softening into something that looked almost like wonder.

“I see, Harry. Yes, I do believe I see now.” He leaned back in his chair and sipped a mug of cocoa Harry could have sworn wasn’t there a moment ago. Sudden warmth near his arm signaled that he too now had a cup.

“You—you do, sir? Albus?”

The headmaster was looking at him the same way his dimensional counterpart had once looked at him, Harry realized.

“Yes, I do.” A gentle smile slowly spread on his ancient face. “Oh Harry. You brave, brave man.”

*Huh?*

“Huh? Er, I mean, sorry sir, but I don’t—”

Dumbledore’s smile turned indulgent. “Have no fear of me, Harry. Any lingering doubts on my part have already been laid to rest by your outstanding patronuses at Gringotts and by Fawkes’ obvious seal of approval.”

“O-kay…”

“But this explains everything! I confess I’ve been deeply curious about why you’d run away to the Forest of all places, why you’d never disclose your surname, why you’d pretend to be a squib, to the
point of risking even your soul, and why Aberforth would have been so deeply protective of you. Of course, it’s all so clear now!” The Headmaster grinned triumphantly. “Aberforth knew and gave his all to protect you!” His face fell for a moment. “Ab always reserved a particular rancor for children… mistreated by those hungering for power and fame.”

Harry had no idea where this conversation was going, but he was definitely starting to doubt he’d like it.

“Albus, I’m sorry, I really don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted, his voice clear and tinged with awe. “How very, truly, wonderfully improbable you are. To be born into such a world and to rise above it, to strive to protect others despite the bonds which, however hateful they must be to you, are still very real. You truly have surpassed your father in every way that could ever matter.”

“My—my father?”

No, no, no! What has he figured out?

Sighing, the older wizard gathered his robes and moved over to the chair next to Harry. “My dear boy, I won’t tell anyone, you have my word. But your abilities, your history, your knowledge of his true name and his past deeds, even your appearance a bit…well, forgive me, but it is rather obvious now.” He patted Harry’s arm and returned to studying him with that same look of wonder. “Imagine it! That Tom Riddle could have such a son!”

The world shrieked to a stop.

. . .

“Suh-huh-wha?”

Harry’s mind shuddered and then sped into overdrive.

“What? Oh my God—Eww!” He wanted to brush his teeth immediately. “Oh, eurgh!” And take a shower.

Dumbledore looked at him sympathetically. “Harry, as I said, your secret is safe wi—”

“Voldemort is not my dad,” he choked out. “Seriously? Christ, that’s disgusting!”

A muffled little huff from the corner revealed that bloody Fawkes was laughing at him.

“Now Harry, please don’t feel you must deny your identity to me. I cannot overstate how impressed I am that you would rise above a childhood which I can only imagine to become such a brave, genuine young man. I’ve nothing but respect for you!” The headmaster’s eyes shone with sincerity.

Oh my God. This isn’t happening.

"Listen to me, Albus. I’m telling you, Riddle isn’t my dad, for fu—heaven’s sake! I know what I do about him because I did research—there’s still records of him being Head Boy and all that, and I can’t believe that Parseltongue is only spoken by people in his family line, because I’m not in it!” He took a deep breath. “And Ab took me in because he was just a really good, decent man. That’s all.”

Dumbledore regarded him solemnly for several moments before sighing again. “One day, Harry,” he pronounced mysteriously, “and on that day, I shall be here for you if you need me.”
He doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. This is crazy! This is…How can he even…it’s insane—it’s—it’s—

Harry took a deep breath.

It’s…it’s actually kind of logical, really. I mean, it’s way more likely than me being a dimensional time traveler who got Kissed by a Dementor and can speak Parseltongue because Voldemort’s killing curse rebounded or whatever.

... Actually, I’d be kind of worried for Dumbledore’s sanity if he did come up with that explanation.

Harry was suddenly exhausted and had no idea how to convince Albus just how wrong he was.

“Let us speak no more of this now, Harry,” Dumbledore suggested softly. “You have my word that such information will remain between the two of us, just as I’ll tell no one you were responsible for the patronuses at Gringotts unless you direct me otherwise. I would, however, ask that you show me to the Chamber. While I believe you that the basilisk is dead, I cannot in good conscience allow children to remain here unless I have verified there is no further threat.”

It was a fair point. Together they descended into the Chamber once more. Muttering something about ‘pub spells,’ Dumbledore grinned at the corked snake before marveling at the serpents encased in stone and ice. His explanation for their existence—something about Transfiguration, charmed triggers, Runes, and animation spells—went way above Harry’s head. The old wizard just smiled indulgently and did something—Harry only felt a massive crest of magic—that he claimed took care of them permanently, lest any somehow ‘reconstitute’ themselves.

When the old man saw the great basilisk, he goggled at Harry.

“Such a feat deserves recognition, my boy.”

“He was a rooster both brave and effective,” Harry deadpanned.

Dumbledore snorted, but his voice was gentle. “Really, Harry—”

“I don’t want any. Please keep it quiet.” He returned the headmaster’s entreatying look with a firm stare. “Besides, do you think it’s a good idea for Tom to know it’s dead?”

The old man’s sigh echoed through the Chamber.

Together they checked the room that lay through the tunnel in Slytherin’s mouth, which was blessedly empty. As they left, Harry made sure that the entrances were all shut, and Albus cast a warding charm which he claimed would inform him if the hidden shaft or Chamber were ever breached.

Harry made to finally leave the school as they departed from the loo, but Dumbledore stopped him and led him back to his office, an amused glint in his eye.

“I believe Hagrid will miss him, will he not?” he asked looking to the prone rooster, which was feebly twitching a leg that was sticking straight up.

Harry groaned and raised his want to Stupefy the bird, but a whirling flash of pink from the back corner of the office caught his attention instead.
He ignored Dumbledore stiffening by his side and approached what he realized was a large landscape depicting a lazy whirlwind of hundreds, maybe thousands, of flowers. Their pink petals danced in the wind and rested upon the expanse of rolling hills like new-fallen snow.

*I’ll be damned.*

“Those…those are all corncockles, aren’t they Albus?”

Harry turned to find the headmaster gazing at the gentle storm of flowers, his eyes far away.

“Sir?”

He watched as the older man blinked and came back to himself with a placid smile that Harry didn’t believe for a moment.

“Corncockles, you say? Indeed they are, my boy.”

He didn’t seem inclined to offer more, but Harry felt that, after an afternoon spent protesting that he wasn’t Voldemort’s kid, it was his turn to push a little.

“Just like the one that Ariana gave me.”

Albus nodded almost imperceptibly, his voice cracking like old parchment when he finally spoke. “Indeed. I—I admit I was shocked when I realized you’d administered such a flower to save Aberforth last year. I…I wondered if you had somehow gotten it from her.”

The wind in the painting suddenly surged and a swirl of petals arced through the sky like a flock of birds.

“I suppose you know her story. My family’s story.”

Harry nodded and the Headmaster closed his eyes.

“Ms. George was kind enough to paint two portraits of my sister. I have never been…I do not enjoy being with her Ariana, for all I feel is guilt and loathing for the man that I was.

“But I did love her. For a time I reveled in my power and cherished the notion that I could somehow extract the bit of her soul that Ms. George had managed to replicate, that spark of Ariana, and bring her out of the painting and into the real world…” Albus shook his head sadly as Harry’s eye widened in alarm at the thought. “But a portrait is no more than an echo at best, and I trust you know that there is no magic that can truly bring the dead back to life.”

The memory of a conversation with his own Dumbledore after the Tournament wormed its way to the fore of Harry’s mind and he shivered.

“Of course, I eventually concluded that such a plan was sophomoric fantasy. But in my vainglorious quest I discovered that I could combine Transfiguration and Charms to translate a relatively simple three-dimensional object into the world of the paintings.” Dumbledore smiled ruefully. “Ariana had always adored corncockles. I had hoped then that I could fill her world with the sorts of things she had loved in life—with books, and art, and all manner of beautiful things to delight an ever-young heart. Of course, one could just *paint* such things in, but I…I wanted her to be surrounded by *real* things, not just images.”

The Headmaster opened a drawer in a small bureau and pulled out a freshly-cut corncockle.
“But for my all my trying, I could only put these in her world. Never anything else.”

Harry watched in silent wonder as Dumbledore slowly pushed the flower against the canvas, whispers of spells rustling through the silent room. A moment later the Headmaster’s shoulders sagged from effort as another flower joined the painted whirlwind.

“I am astounded that she somehow managed to return one of my flowers back to our world and pass it on to you. But I have always suspected that Ariana and her magic would have put both Aberforth and I to shame, had she been able to live the life that should have been hers.” He shook his head sadly. “At any rate, our mother was fond of saying that some magic is quiet and awesome and should never be explained.”

Harry and Albus stood shoulder to shoulder and watched the lazy dance of flowers.

“I do wonder at your corncockle’s potency, Harry. It should have taken several flowers to have such an immediate emetic effect….But many plants’ magical properties increase the longer they are alive. Perhaps my gifts to my sister truly live on in her world, and have done so for many decades.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. We’re getting into theory that is way beyond me.

“Ah well, no matter, I suppose.”

It suddenly struck Harry that Dumbledore was now orphaned of all his family as well.

_I wonder what he did for Christmas._

“Maybe you should stop giving an empty portrait flowers and try talking to Ariana?” The headmaster whipped around, a glare darkening his face, but Harry plowed on. “I know it’s not my place Albus, and I know she’s really only an echo of your sister, but…”

The image of his parents’ ghostly images coming from Voldemort’s wand flashed before his eyes. _How many times did I replay the sound of their voices, remember the way their eyes looked at me that night, when I was stuck in my room at the Dursleys?_

“…but maybe an echo is better than silence?” He coughed awkwardly and wrenched his thoughts away from his parents. “I mean, she’s made my life better. And Ab always seemed better for spending time with her.”

The headmaster said nothing and Harry, ever the bartender, suspected he’d probably crossed a line. _Oh, screw it._

He’d been thinking she would like it anyway, and had planned on buying a copy the next time he went to a Muggle city.

“James Bond.”

Albus blinked. “Harry?”

“Ariana likes to have books read to her. She’s been into the whole spy thing lately because of, well, what you asked us to do at the Head. I bet she’d love to hear about James Bond. A famous fictional Muggle spy. The author of the books is Ian…er, Fleming, I think.”

Dumbledore looked completely wrong-footed. “I—I shall consider it, I suppose.”

“But skip any sex parts. Ariana knows about sex—I kind of had to explain it to her once—but
definitely skip the sexy bits if you want to avoid more conversations like that.”

After a long pause Albus laughed, almost unwillingly, and Harry joined him as they watched another gust scatter the petals like a starburst.

Chapter End Notes

Chamber of Secrets note: My conception of the Chamber of Secrets is based primarily on the movie version. In the book, there are no stone snakes flanking the walkway, but I obviously needed them here. Also, it wasn’t until recently that I realized how stupid my earlier treatment of the Chamber was (i.e., having Pel and Ab talk about there having been petrifications back in the ‘40s). The fact that no students died during its run in Harry’s second year was really ‘sheer dumb luck.’ My conception of something similar happening in the ‘40s was naive at best.

_Puber Foramini_ literally means “cork for the opening”

Parseltongue note: I know that JKR has stated that Harry lost his ability to speak Parseltongue when the Horcrux was destroyed, but I had forgotten about that when plotting out the story. So yes, he shouldn’t be able to access the Chamber if we go by JKR’s response to a fan, but I’ve decided I’m okay with taking a liberty here.

As always, I appreciate you reading the story, and I thank you for your comments!

Next on The Second String: Some canon characters barely seen in this story—or not seen yet at all—take center stage, and Harry squares off against three formidable canon ladies in Chapter 28, “This Old House.”
Harry shifted his eyes back and forth between the giant hall before him and Gideon at his side.

“Are you serious?”

The other man tensed. “I thought it might be fun. A friend from school said they’re popular.”

Harry watched as young Muggles flocked to the building on the outskirts of an Aberdeen neighborhood. The music blasting from inside was loud and not really his taste. *Good lord, disco.* On the other hand, he’d nearly forgotten what it was like to be surrounded by cars and neon lights, to smell deep-fried food, to see people in clothes far tighter and shorter than those favored by magicals.

“Do you know how?”

Gideon shook his head. “Nope. You?”

“No. I’ve *seen* people do it, but…”

“Then we can be embarrassed together.”

Harry licked his lips. This was *not* the sort of thing he had expected on his first date with Gideon. The man usually seemed so…reserved. “Why not,” he grinned. “Let’s go.”

Together the pair walked into the roller-skating rink.

Twenty minutes later, Gideon was sprawled out on the rink floor once again. Looking down at him, Harry couldn’t decide if the man looked incredibly hot or incredibly ridiculous. *Probably half and half,* he grinned, *though the skates do tip the scales towards ridiculous.* Indeed, the electric blue leather wasn’t really offensive, but the rink owner, obviously a whimsical sort, had stitched patches onto all his skates.

*Purple unicorns do nothing for Gideon.* To be fair, the grinning tigers on Harry’s green pair weren’t much better.

He helped his date up for the umpteenth time, just managing not to fall himself under their combined weight. “Gideon, you’re really bad at this.”

Gideon just grunted.

It took much swearing and a number of accidental (and not-so-accidental) gropes, but Harry finally managed to steer the man into one of the booths that flanked the rink.

Holding one of his arms gingerly, Gideon glared at the Muggles who zoomed and twirled. “I don’t *get* it—*how* are they doing that? They make it look easy…And you! You’ve only fallen twice, and
one of those times was my fault!”

Harry shrugged and settled in next to him, his eyes on the people laughing and racing about.

“You want to go out there more, don’t you?” Gideon sighed.

“Well…”

“Oh, go on then. I’m good here for a bit. I’ll get used to these things from the safety of my seat.”

Although Harry was pretty sure dating etiquette dictated he shouldn’t just leave, this was fun. “I’ll just do a few laps, and then be right back!”

He exulted in the feeling of the air on his face as he whisked around the rink. Gideon might be disappointed in roller-skating, but Harry thought the excursion had been a brilliant idea.

Eventually he sank into the booth next to Gideon. They spent the next several songs watching the skating Muggles and delighting each other with little comments about those who stood out.

Funny, I always hated when Petunia carped on every person she saw. But doing this with Gid is pretty entertaining.

“Harry,” his date suddenly murmured, “why are they looking at us like that?”

The younger wizard glanced around and noticed several people sending scathing looks their way as they whispered furiously to each other.

Why…?

Oh yeah. I forgot about this. And it is the ‘70s. “Well, I think in the Muggle world they don’t much hold to blokes being involved with each other, and I don’t think most who are show it off in public. It might even be illegal, I think. We’re sitting awfully close to not be together.”

Gideon’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? They have a problem with that?” He shook his head and Harry’s eyes traced the red lock that curled around his ear. “That’s horrible! I don’t have anything against Muggles, but for them to have such silly ideas…” He shook his head again and the curl dislodged.

Harry frowned and cast a mild Muggle-repelling charm to encourage others not to notice them.

“Honestly, Gideon, it’s not all that different from wizards.”

“What? We think no such—”

“You do about squibs,” Harry interrupted bluntly. “It’s not their fault they aren’t like everyone else in the wizarding world, but that world hates them for it anyway. It’s just as silly, really.” He sat back thoughtfully. “See, if you’re a squib, you have to walk around knowing that everyone will think differently of you if they find out what you are, everyone will look at you the way those people are looking at us now. You know that you’ll never get the benefit of the doubt…you’re just always wrong, no matter what you do.”

Gideon eyed him thoughtfully, his face was troubled. “So why did you pretend to be a squib then?”

I’m a bleeding idiot. My first goddamn date and I have to blow it by going all self-righteous!

... 

And Christ, I don’t want to lie to him.
The younger wizard could only shake his head. “I don’t…It just doesn’t matter anymore. And it’s not really the sort of story to talk about here, y’know? So, uh, why don’t we just ignore all them and I’ll get us something to eat, yeah?”

“Fair enough,” Gideon agreed slowly, but waved him off with a smile.

Harry skated back several minutes later with two greasy fish sandwiches wrapped in thick paper, and the two ate in a companionable silence before Gideon spoke up again. “You know, I have a squib cousin.”

With an arched eyebrow and a mouth full of fish, Harry beckoned him to go on.

“Yeah, a second cousin actually. I never got to really meet him since I was still pretty young when he didn’t get his Hogwarts letter.”

“Was he sent away?”

Gideon huffed. “His grandmother—my great-aunt Muriel—made it out like she’d found some wonderful place for ‘people like him.’ But yeah, they sent him away. I know that my sister looked into it and found out he’d gotten some job working with money in the Muggle world, but that’s all we know.”

*Job working with money…*

The pinched face and Percy-like demeanor of Myrtle’s money man immediately popped into his head. “Wait, is your cousin Clark Prewett?”

Eyes wide, Gideon nodded.

“I’ve actually met him. He’s…kind of an accountant. He keeps the books for, um, a company of sorts that does some business with the Head. Even did some work on the Head’s finances this summer when I sold part to the Dearborns. I never put it together that you have the same surname.”

The other man sat forward eagerly in his seat. “So what’s he like? Are you friends?”

Harry bit his lip. “Well, I’ve not spent a lot of time with him. He’s…he’s kind of standoffish, really. Not really the sort someone gets to know easily.”

Gideon’s face fell. “Oh. Still, maybe someday I can meet him. I’ve always been curious.”

From there the conversation moved into stories of Gideon’s childhood as the youngest Prewett boy. Much like he did when he spoke about his clocks, he became much more talkative when the topic was his family. A portrait of a close-knit, middle-class wizarding family slowly emerged, with Fabian being Gideon’s ever-present companion, the talkative charmer to complement his more watchful and reserved little brother. Meanwhile, their big sister Molly had taken over running the household after their mother’s early death. While their father worked, it was Molly who saw to the housework, the cooking, and her little brother. Gideon recounted how lost he’d felt when she was away at Hogwarts.

“It was the worst after Fab left for school,” the redhead mused. “I was at home alone with Dad, and we’re similar people. With Molly and Fab gone, the house was so silent. It just didn’t feel…like home, I suppose.” He chewed a chip thoughtfully. “That’s probably why I made the Hat put me in Gryffindor.”

“You were a Gryffindor?”
Gideon laughed. “Yeah, I know, I don’t quite fit the mold. No, the Hat thought about Ravenclaw but wanted me for Hufflepuff in the end. I might have gotten a bit shirty with it. Said that I was going to live with my sister and brother and there wasn’t a damn thing it could do to stop me. It said that just showed how much I belonged in Hufflepuff.” He snorted at Harry’s giggle. “…And then I might have threatened to steal it, cut it up, and make it into a pair of pants that I’d wear every day, no matter how smelly they got.”

The younger wizard stared, at once appalled and impressed. “You threatened to turn the Sorting Hat into underwear?”

A pink flush colored Gideon’s ears. “Well, I was eleven! But the Hat thought about it and said that’s ‘exactly the sort of bold but dim-witted scheme a Gryffindor would think advisable,’ so it sorted me there.”

We’re both of us Gryffindors by choice.

“Do me a favor and don’t mention which House it wanted me for to Fabe. He’s always teased me about not being a real Gryffindor, and I may have implied that the Hat thought I’d be a great Slytherin.”

Harry snorted a bit of his drink out of his nose.

Gideon shrugged sheepishly. “Well, I figured it’d be a good way to make him think twice before targeting me with any of his ‘little ideas.’ He wasn’t keen on arsing off his almost-Slytherin little brother for years. Still is, a bit, come to think of it.”

“Sounds pretty Slytherin to me,” Harry said with a smile. “So what you’re really saying is that you have aspects of all the Houses in your character?”

“Few can comprehend the depths of my soul,” Gideon agreed solemnly.

“How mysterious.”

“It’s the beard, really.”

Eventually Harry appealed to Gideon’s Gryffindor bravery and convinced him to give skating one more try.

“Not so much bravery as it is a profound lack of common sense,” the man groused as, five minutes later, he was again glued fast to the railing.

Admitting defeat, the pair amused themselves walking around Aberdeen instead, with Harry explaining many of the Muggle innovations with which the other wizard was unfamiliar. Eventually even warming charms couldn’t combat the bitter chill of northern Scotland in winter, and they decided to call it a night.

“So…” Harry said, smiling awkwardly as they stood halfway between the clock shop and the Head. The end of a date is weird. Should I just kiss him? Ask him out again? But we’ve already had sex. What’s the right move here?

Well, I’d really like more sex if that’s on the table, his inner voice piped up helpfully.

Harry conceded it made a very good point.

“So…” he repeated, his face heating despite the cold, “Guin redid a room for me. It’s really nice.”
“That’s good. I wouldn’t want you sleeping in a stable your whole life.”

“Yeah…wanna come and see it?”

The other man looked thoughtful. “I really should, I suppose. Make sure the mantle clock I gave you looks nice in there and all.”

“I hadn’t realized that *Prodigious Clocks* makes house calls.”

“We pride ourselves on customer satisfaction.” Gideon pulled him in for a kiss even as Harry groaned at their horrible lines.

*Well, that was easy.*

xoxoxox

10 February, 1979

A month later, Harry was perched next to Gideon on the fence of Ab’s old goat pasture.

“Think he’ll get it this time?”

Gideon cocked his head. “Maybe. Hopefully. I’m tired of hearing him whinge about it.”

Harry smiled, even as Fabian glared around the field. Guin’s great Clydesdale horse was stomping its foot impatiently, while Doc’s pint-sized squid propelled itself through the air.

He’d spent several afternoons over the last few weeks teaching the Dearborns and the Prewetts how to cast the Patronus charm. After the debacle at Gringotts, he was completely in favor of as many people as possible knowing how to defend themselves. At this point, all but Fabian had managed the spell, and the man was taking it personally.

Fabian tried again and swore.

“Why don’t you show him how it’s done, Gid?”

“Trying to sow strife in my family?”

“Well, it’s kinda funny to watch him get mad.”

Chuckling, Gideon gave him a quick kiss before jumping down from the fence and drawing his wand.

An incantation later and his penguin patronus was riding unseen waves above them.

“Bugger off!” Fabian groused. “Show-off.”

“Oh c’mon, Prewett! You can do it!” Guin encouraged. “I’ll make your favorite for breakfast tomorrow…”

The man’s narrowed thoughtfully. Fabian hadn’t seemed to care much one way or the other that Gideon and Harry were seeing each other—

*And by ‘seeing each other,’ I really mean we spend half our nights in each other’s beds…*

—but he’d been thrilled that his brother’s new…relationship came with easy access to Guin’s
Honestly, I think he makes it to breakfast at the Head more often than I do these days.

“Happy memories!” Harry reminded as the man closed his eyes and raised his wand.

A moment later the group burst into applause

Fabian was the only one not smiling.

“This is your fault, Harry. You’re a rubbish teacher.”

Gid stroked his beard thoughtfully. “No, I can see the symbolism. You do like to hop from flower to flower, so to speak.”

“My sex life is hardly the reason for that...abomination!” Fabian scowled. They all watched as the exuberant silver butterfly fluttered through the snow-covered meadow.

“I think it’s pretty,” Doc approved.

“It’s…it’s…girly!”

“It’s hardly your patronus’ fault you’re insecure,” Guin chided.

Fabian tried to send a deadly glare her way, but as the butterfly circled his head he smiled reluctantly at it.

“S’what I get for ribbing Gid on his penguin I guess. Ridiculous animals, those are.”

Gideon shrugged. “I like penguins.”

xoxoxox

25 February, 1979

He could feel Pel’s amusement following him around the pub. Scowling, Harry resolved not to give the old man the satisfaction of acknowledging him. Instead, he focused on wiping down the bar and diverted himself with thoughts on his upcoming date with Gideon.

Tonight he was hoping to take the man to do something he’d always wanted, but had never been allowed to do. He remembered all too well watching Aunt Petunia dole out 20p pieces to Dudley so that he could go with his little gang, always knowing that would never, ever, be him.

Gideon’s usually up for anything...and I think he’ll find arcade games fascinating, at least. Maybe they’ll come up with a clock you can play games on...

A low chuckle from the solicitor’s direction interrupted his musing.

He ground his teeth.

Goddammit.

Why did I show him the letter?

His left hand moved to his pocket and crumpled Dumbledore’s note into an even tinier ball.

I should’ve learned from the last time.
It had seemed natural enough to tell the barfly right away that Dumbledore had convinced himself
Harry was Voldemort’s bloody *kid*. He’d been quite keen for any advice on how to deal with the
situation.

But when the old lawyer had finally been able to speak through his laughter, all he’d said was “Ab
would’a loved this, lad!” before collapsing in fresh giggles.

*Yes, thank you Pel. Great help you’ve been.*

The note he’d received today was a seemingly-innocent reminder that Harry should “make haste to
pass on information overheard in the Head” to the Headmaster. The postscript added that
Dumbledore “was always there for him should he wish to share any intimate details regarding their
enemy gleaned from his unique position.”

Harry wanted to pound his head on the bar.

Another giggle.

Pel was entirely too amused by the whole thing.

“What’re you on about, Pel?” Doc asked from across the room.

“Ignore him, he’s just being an old bast—” Harry snapped, only to be interrupted by a warming
sensation on his chest.

He and the Dearborns looked at each other in surprise.

Doc swore under his breath as they retreated to the kitchen.

The Nines’ tags were signalling a Muggleborn family in distress.

*Dammit it all.*

*I thought we were done with this.*

Since the Battle at Gringotts, no one had heard anything from Voldemort, and the tags had been
blessedly silent.

He frowned as the Dearborns glanced at each other, some unspoken communication seeming to pass
between them.

“Harry, can you get this one for me please?” Guin muttered. “I know it’s my turn but I—I’m sorry, I
just can’t tonight.”

*Well, what about Doc then? Only one person needs to man the bar tonight anyway, and that way I
can still go out with Gid!* Harry wanted to object.

“Yeah, uh, sure, I guess,” he responded instead, doing his best to swallow his irritation. “Um—could
you send Gid a note though? Tell him…I don’t know…that I’m not feeling well and turned in
early?”

Guin nodded, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

Moments later, he Apparated to Myrtle’s warehouse, knowing that their short vacation from the war
had come to an end.
It was a fairly routine mission. Will Armstrong once again served as Harry’s partner, and together with Myrtle and three others they made short work of the four green Death Eaters and their single more experienced handler.

While the others carted off the lone enemy survivor to ensure he wasn’t an Auror, Will and Harry set to work transfiguring corpses. As the dark-skinned young man chatted with him about his girlfriend over a neat row of Death Eater bodies, Harry wondered absently if he’d become too inured to killing people.

“...a great Christmas though. Marina’s parents seemed to take to me pretty well, and I’ve even got a ring, so now I just have to decide how to—”

Will cut himself off when he, like Harry, felt his dog tag grow warm again. “What the—another one?”

Harry bit his lip. “Let’s get moving on these—we can’t leave them here.”

Five minutes later they were in the warehouse again. The faces of the other three looked grave.

“Yeah, I know. They’re doing multiple attacks,” Myrtle said the moment they appeared. “Let’s go. Same strategy.”

Shite.

Halfway through the next raid Harry’s dog tag grew warm yet again. “We have to stay focused, ignore it!” Myrtle called over the crackle of spellfire.

By the time they’d secured the scene, his tag had gone cold.

“Oi, Ms. M.? Why’s it cold?” one of the mercenaries asked.

Myrtle looked sick, and Harry doubted it had anything to do with the dead in front of them. “Means the call’s dead. That raid’s over.”

Harry closed his eyes.

When he and Will had finished up and Apparated back to the warehouse, they found Myrtle leaving the interrogation room as Gigi the Obliviator and their medic Pierce played cards in the corner.

“I didn’t get much from him,” she muttered, wiping her bloody hands on a rag. “All the Death Eater knew was that He wanted to get more warm bodies in his ranks, thus more initiation raids. Bastard knows someone’s helping the Muggleborn, I guess, so he had the initiations all happening the same night.”

Harry felt the peace he’d enjoyed since Christmas slipping through his fingers.

It was never going to last.

“There’s not enough of us to cover multiple raids if they keep doing this,” Will observed.

Myrtle threw the gory cloth to the floor. “I know that!” she snapped. A moment later she closed her eyes, breathing deeply. “I know,” she repeated. “At least it explains why there were fewer Death Eaters on each raid—they only have so many new recruits at one time. Hopefully this won’t become a regular thing.”

Armstrong sighed. “It’s not a good idea to base battle plans on ‘hopefully.’”
Too right that.

From the look on her face, Myrtle was thinking the same thing.

xoxoxox

26 February, 1979

Harry slept until mid-morning the next day. He yawned, rubbing the crusted sleep from his eyes. *Bugger, last night was wretched.*

When he finally dragged himself to the public room to find some breakfast, Guin and Doc were sitting at a table talking quietly.

“Last night that bad then?” Doc asked, eyeing Harry carefully.

He sighed and filled them in on Voldemort’s latest tactic.

Guin gasped. “Merlin, I thought that the tags were malfunctioning! “I never even thought...”

Harry gulped down some tea. “Yeah. We’re going to have to figure out a way to handle this.”

Guin and Doc glanced at each other.

“Well, Harry, I’m actually not going to be doing any more raids—” Guin began.

“And I’m...I’m not sure what I’ll be doing,” Doc broke in, with an abashed look at his wife.

Harry put his mug down with an audible *thump*. “What? What are you—you’re quitting the *war*?”

Doc bristled. “Well, yes and no. I mean, it’s complicated—”

“It’s not complicated at all,” Guin interjected. “It’s quite simple. He got me up the duff, so I’m out. At least for a while.”

*Up the*—?

Harry blinked. “You mean you’re pregnant!”

“Really very,” the young brunette grinned. “Been so since the beginning of December. But pregnancies are delicate for the first few months, so you’re not supposed to tell anyone right away. I’m due in September.”

“Wow—I mean, that’s bloody wonderful you two! Is it a boy or a girl, then?”

Guin rolled her eyes. “Oh for goodness’ sake, Harry, it’s far too early to tell that. We’re going to wait and be surprised anyway.”

Meanwhile Doc was mouthing *definitely a girl!* with a wide smile—

—which promptly faded upon Guin’s pointed look.

“As for me, well, Guin here thinks I should keep responding to calls, but...I can’t stand the idea of leaving my pregnant wife in the pub while I go out. No *matter*—” he raised his hand to stop the response Guin was poised to make, “—no matter that, yes, I bloody well know that she is a *smart and capable woman who can handle herself without the assistance of a man*. It still doesn’t sit right
with me.

“And honestly,” Doc continued, idly crumpling a copy of the *Prophet* with his remaining arm, “my dad was an Auror who got himself killed before I could know him. I don’t...I don’t want my girl—yes, or boy—to grow up like that. I already almost died for all this once and I, well, I don’t know if it makes me a coward or selfish, but...” The man sighed heavily again.

Doc’s confession hit Harry like a physical blow. His own parents’ deaths started replaying in his mind unbidden. “Yeah,” he admitted quietly. “Yeah, I understand. I don’t think wanting that makes you a coward, Doc.”

As Doc nodded tightly and Guin smiled, another realization made him shiver with unnatural cold.

*September. She said the baby’s due in September. Their child...their kid will be in my year at Hogwarts.*

*But there was no Dearborn in my year. Or the one above me.*

Sure, it was possible that the Guin and Doc of his world had moved to another country, or that for one reason or another they didn’t conceive a child in December of 1978...

*Did the Doc in my world die, the day I met him here?*

*Or maybe they died in some battle I don’t even know about.*

*Well. Not this time they won’t.*

“Anyway,” he said, more to cut those thoughts short than because he had something to say, “I think it’s great. Though you should let Myrtle know.”

“Of course.” Guin bit her lip. “Harry, this is really your place. You don’t mind having a baby here, do you? Because we can move—”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous,” he interrupted. “Course I don’t mind. And you do own thirty percent of the place. It’s your home as much as mine.”

The tension bled out of Guin’s shoulders, while a goofy grin replaced Doc’s frown. “I’m going to be someone’s *dad*, Harry, can you believe it? I can just see her now, wicked, clever and a beauty—just like her mum!”

Guin rolled her eyes.

“I pity the poor boys who come for your daughter, Doc,” Harry intoned in mock seriousness.

“Oh...Oh, I haven’t even thought of that...” An absolutely feral look crept over his farmboy face. “Oh, I’ll eat the grubby-handed little bastards *alive*, mark my words!”

Harry caught Guin muttering something about the male ego under her breath.

xoxoxoxox

4 March, 1979

*Deep breath.*

*It’ll be fine. I’ve been there before.*
Actually, I’ve been there before in both universes.

But those times were totally, completely different!

Shite.

Deep breath, dammit!


Okay. It’s fine. I look fine.

Is fine good enough?

“I just, I dunno...y’know?”

“Very articulate,” Gideon said, rubbing circles on the nape of Harry’s neck. “Stop fretting. This is no big deal.”

“This is entirely a big deal, Gid! I’ve never had to meet the family of a person I’m seeing before!” He smoothed down his robes again. “What if they hate me?”

“They aren’t going to hate you. If things start going poorly, I’ll just tell Molly that the man who distracted Him at the Battle of Gringotts was absolutely terrified to meet her. It’ll make her day.”

“Belt up, you’ll say nothing of the sort,” Harry muttered distractedly as he tried one last time to make his hair presentable.

xoxoxox

Despite years living in Hogsmeade’s dodgiest establishment, Harry found himself wholly unprepared for the barely-controlled chaos of the Burrow overrun with five young boys.

The newly-mobile twins tracked little Percy like he was the most vulnerable animal in a herd, while a six year-old Charlie whinged about being forced to wear trousers. Harry didn’t quite get the issue there, but figured it had something to do with being six years old. Bill compounded his brother’s crankiness by trying to prank him with Zonko’s products, and someone had put a jumper on the cat.

“Sept and Arthur are probably hiding in the shed,” Gideon murmured to Harry after a distracted Molly welcomed them in and then hurried off to the kitchen. “I’m just going to tell them we’re here. Be right back.”

Who the hell is Sept? I didn’t even think about unknown Weasleys or Prewetts being here!

As his date left out the back, Harry turned to Fabian, only to find that the man had abandoned him for the kitchen.

Okay. They’re Weasleys.

I know Weasleys.

He grinned at the scene before him, and barely restrained a laugh when he realized one of the the twins had divested himself of his nappy and hidden it, well, somewhere.

“Who’re you?” Charlie asked without preamble.
He smiled down at the boy. “Harry. I’m with your Uncle Gideon.”

Bill’s eyes widened. “S’it true you work at the Hog’s Head?”

Charlie blinked. “Mum says there’s vampires there, yeah? Seen a vampire?”

“What about a hag?”

“Werewolf…or a dragon?”

“Do people really fight there?”

“I hate babies!” Percy lamented from the corner.

Harry started feeling a bit wild about the eyes.

Bill apparently had grown tired of the topic of the Head. “So are you in love with Uncle Gideon?”

“Well—” he sputtered.

“Are you gonna get married?” Charlie eyed him critically.

Merlin, help me.

George—or Fred?—half-walked, half-crawled over and pointed a knitting needle at Harry. “Boom,” he intoned in all solemnity before ripping a long fart.

Undeterred, Bill moved on. “S’it true you killed someone?”

Gideon, where are you? Save me.

“Really?” Charlie’s eyes widened.


Harry floundered. “You boys, um, do you…do you like Quidditch?”

Charlie paused. “Yeah…Uncle Gideon likes Quidditch too…so are you gonna get married an’ kiss a lot then?”

“Eww,” Percy observed from behind a chair.

Bill’s face grew thoughtful. “Mum says Uncle Gideon needs somebody to kiss. She says it a lot.”

“An’ she says that Uncle Fabe needs a lot less somebodies to kiss.”

“So didja kill somebody?” the eldest boy pressed.

The door to the kitchen opened and Fabian strode in. “Nephews! Gather round, your Uncle Fabian has tales to tell!”

Harry was instantly forgotten.

“You’re my hero, mate,” he muttered as the other man brushed past on the way to the sofa.

“They sense your fear,” Fabian whispered back. “Run, Harry. Run.”
Harry fled past the kitchen and wandered outside towards Arthur Weasley’s shed.

Three men were talking in low voices when he entered the room, dimly lit and overflowing with a hodge-podge of what any sane Muggle would consider junk.

Gideon looked up immediately. “Oh, Merlin, Harry, I’m sorry for abandoning you! I didn’t mean to stay out here so long.”

“Don’t worry about it, Fabian rescued me,” Harry grinned, though he did poke Gideon in the ribs. “And the boys are great. Lots of—er, energy,” he added with a quick smile at Mr. Weasley.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Arthur said mildly, sticking out his hand. “We haven’t been introduced. Arthur Weasley.”

Harry shook it. “I’ve heard a lot about you, and I remember you from the pub last year. Harry Aberforth.”

Next to him, an older man was leaning against a shelf filled with…electric tea kettles? Harry shifted awkwardly as the man peered down at him through rimless spectacles. “And I’m Septimus Weasley, this one’s father,” he said, gesturing towards Arthur. “You’re the one who pretended to be a squib and killed Walden Macnair.”

All the air seemed to have been sucked out of the shed. Arthur looked at the floor and Gideon was making to stand between Harry and the Weasley patriarch.

_Bugger. Will I never get past that?_

Harry gently kept Gideon behind him and regarded the man. “Yes, sir, I am.”

“And why would you do something mad like that?”

He could feel Gideon tense.

“My reasons are my own, sir,” he responded, in what he hoped was a polite but firm voice.

The man stared hard at him before STARTLING them all with a hoot of laughter. “Har! ‘Reasons are his own,’ he says! Suppose I’m not one who can complain about mental young wizards, though. I married a Black, and I’m sure most would say that’s barmier than playing the squib!”

The tension in Harry’s shoulders uncoiled as the elder Weasley grinned and clapped him on the back.

Rolling his eyes at his father, Arthur opened the door. “Well, let’s go inside, shall we? I’ve some ale for us, and Molly will be wondering where we’ve gotten to.”

Despite his reservations about his first dinner with Gideon at the Burrow, the evening proved...fun. Between stroppy toddlers upturning plates and repeated protestations that _he poked me first!_, Arthur regaled the table with amusing stories about calls he’d gone on in his capacity as an agent in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts branch of the DMLE.

Fabian’s tales of his more recent dates were promptly silenced by Molly the moment he got to the inappropriate bits. Even Harry spoke up a bit. Wisely avoiding anecdotes about the Head, he instead described the antics of Goat, her kids, and Colin, who now towered over the other Hogwarts thestrals.
Charlie immediately began sculpting his potatoes into a thestral. Or a goat? It was difficult to tell.

Gideon squeezed his leg under the table midway through the meal. Harry had to hold back a goofy smile. *I'm doing okay.*

The men’s eyebrows raised when Harry followed Molly and her levitating pile of pudding dishes to the kitchen. He just shrugged at them. “Well, I *do* run a pub for a living. I do dishes all the time.”

Inside the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley was already stacking plates and setting charms to begin cleaning them.

“Fancy some help?”

The woman startled in surprise, but waved him over nonetheless. “Of course, thank you, Harry.”

The two worked in what Harry believed was a companionable silence for several minutes, their household charms making short work of the dishes and the rather impressive mountain of pots.

“So, Harry, you’ve been seeing my little brother since when, exactly? December?” Molly asked conversationally.

“Yeah, we’ve known each other since April or so—Gid and Fabian come into the Head a lot—but we’ve only been together since right before Christmas.”

“I see,” Molly continued, her eyes on the sink, “and you own the Hog’s Head now, correct?”

“Mostly. I sold part to Guin and Caradoc Dearborn.”

Molly sniffed lightly. “Ah yes. Guinier Eurfron. She was in our year. Slytherin. Well, Caradoc is a good man at least—he and Arthur shared a dorm.”

Harry decided to ignore Molly’s apparent dislike of Guin. “Yeah, they’re really great people. They stepped up to help in the pub when I needed it, and we just decided to make it official.”

The scrub brush Molly was charming attacked a saucepan with vigor.

“And you are also a murderer who never attended school, correct?”

His jaw dropped. “Eh—excuse me?”

She didn’t even turn towards him, her tone deceptively mild. “I just wish to confirm that you are uneducated criminal. Is that information accurate?”

All the blood was rushing to his face and Harry’s throat suddenly felt very dry.

*what the hell what the hell what the hell*

“Well,” he coughed, “um, as for the uneducated bit, I earned eight OWLS in Belgium, and five of those were ‘Outstandings.’ And as for the, er, murderer part, I suppose it depends on how you use the term. I certainly killed a Death Eater who had kidnapped and tortured me and my friend, and had clearly been planning on killing us.”

*I don’t believe it!* his mind goggled. *Does Molly Weasley actually hate me?*

She hummed neutrally. “So one could say you’re a somewhat educated owner of an entirely dodgy establishment who has, shall I say, a *colorful* past?”
Harry opened his mouth to protest, then—

Damn. That’s actually pretty accurate.

“Yes. One could say that, I suppose.”

The dishes continued to wash themselves. Finally, “Albus Dumbledore speaks very highly of you.”

Holy shit, she’s been talking to Dumbledore about me?

Well, at least he didn’t tell her he’s sure I’m Voldemort’s lovechild. Otherwise, we’d never have gotten to pudding.

“Oh. Yeah, we’ve worked together in the past a little.”

“So, a somewhat educated owner of a dodgy pub, who has a colorful past but has also impressed Albus Dumbledore.”

It was not a question, and Harry didn’t attempt to respond.

Heaving a grudging sigh, Molly finally turned to meet his eyes. “And yet, for all that, you and Gideon may very well suit.” Her expression suddenly turned dark and, Harry could admit to himself, bloody terrifying. “However,” she continued in a low, serious voice, her every word punctuated by the shake of a wooden spoon, “if you hurt my baby brother or bring him to harm, I will devote myself to slowly exacting due payment from you, do you understand, Harry?”

Girl’s got a fine mouth for threatenin’ people proper, Ab’s voice approved in his mind.

Harry was torn between laughing, cringing, and protesting. In the end, he simply shrugged. “I understand, Molly.”

The polite smile that snapped onto her face showed just enough teeth to make his shoulders tense. “Oh, well, then excellent, dear. Would you hand me those pots, please?”

xoxoxox

Harry’s shoulders slumped in exhaustion as soon as he and Gideon Apparated back to the point on the street between the Head and the clock shop. “My place? It’ll be quieter,” Gideon asked. “Fabian’s going out tonight.”

“God yes.”

Five minutes later, Harry was lounging on the Prewett brothers’ sofa while Gideon grabbed them bottles of Muggle beer.

“Spending your coin on my competition?” he chided the redhead.

“It’s good,” Gideon shrugged. “So, how badly did Molly lay into you?” When Harry turned to him in shock, the bearded young man just laughed. “You aren’t a special case, Harry. She’s done that to all the girls Fabian brings over. Last few either left in tears, tried to hex Molly, or they got into such a screaming match that Arthur had to muffle the boys’ hearing. Sometimes all three.”

Harry felt rather better at that. “Well, she decided I was a partially uneducated owner of a dodgy pub who had a criminal past but probably had some redeeming qualities because Dumbledore put in a good word for me. Said we may suit, but then promised me she’d get me back if I hurt you.” He thought back. “And then we finished the dishes.”
“Really?” Gideon looked mildly impressed. “Not bad, then. And for the record, remember that Hagrid threatened me with an umbrella and said he’d show me exactly how a half-giant reacts if ‘his boy’s been done wrong.’”

He snorted so hard a bit of beer came out his nose. “Hey—why didn’t you warn me if this is what she always does?”

“You were already nervous. Didn’t see the point of making it worse.”

Harry scowled at his beer.

“Honestly, you got off much lighter than I expected. She must like you.”

“Lighter! Seriously?” Harry gaped. “She called me a murderer and a bunch of other stuff that’s—”

“All technically correct, I’d wager,” Gideon finished for him. He ran an anxious hand through his hair. “I mean, come on, Harry. I couldn’t tell her what your real surname is because I don’t even know that. She’s protective, so of course she’s suspicious.”

Harry shot him a worried, stricken look. I never even thought about that.

“I guess…yeah…I can see that, now that you say it like that. But, I mean, are you upset about the whole surname thing? Because I’ve been Harry Aberforth for a while now, and it’s me. Everything else from before…” He shrugged helplessly. “It just doesn’t matter anymore.”

The other man sighed. “Well, I don’t like not knowing and all the secrecy, sure. But I do like Harry Aberforth.” He reached over to pull Harry in for a kiss, only to peck him playfully on the nose instead. “And you really did do well tonight.”

They lay sprawled on the couch together for a while, hands and legs loosely entwined.

Harry eventually squirmed. “So are we just going to sit here and cuddle tonight?”

Gideon shifted closer. “I was thinking more of engaging in acts of carnal depravity myself,” he remarked with exaggerated nonchalance. “You?”

“Carnal depravity sounds splendid, thank you.”

“That’s fortunate. It would be a terrible bother to find someone else at this hour.”

Harry grinned and punched his boyfriend in the arm.

xoxoxox

24 March, 1979 (the night before Easter)

Several weeks later, sudden warmth on Harry’s chest woke him from a very pleasant dream.

Shite. Attack.

Alarm roused his sleep-addled brain into movement. Carefully getting out of his bed so as to not to wake a sleeping Gideon, he checked his wand and knife before pulling on some rumpled clothes.

He’d been fortunate so far not to have to answer a call while spending the night with Gideon before, but his luck was now up. After a moment’s thought, he scrawled a note.

Guilt bit at him. Gideon had been forthcoming enough about nights he had been on Order duty, even if he refused to provide details, but Harry couldn’t mention his membership in the Nines. And even if I wasn’t prevented by the oath we all swore... I probably wouldn’t.

Shoving his conscience as far back in his mind as he could, he slipped on his shoes.

Within minutes Harry had Apparated to the staging point at the warehouse. Dead silence greeted him.

*Where is everyone? I had to get dressed, surely I can’t be the first one here.*

There had been three more rounds of synchronized attacks since they’d started again. The Nines were all on edge and typically mustered within minutes.

The dog tag on his chest continued to warm, refusing to be ignored. Harry pulled the chain out from under his shirt and eyed the heating metal.

*Wait...this isn’t the Nines tag.*

The dog tag that Myrtle had connected to all the Muggleborn tags they’d given out since the end of the summer rested cool and inert in his palm.

It was the other tag, the one that Harry had forgotten was even on the same chain, that burned.

He stared down at the companion to the tag he’d given to June and Harold Evans on the ship to Belgium. It was from the first generation of dog tags, the type that only connected to the other in its set, and could only call relatives.

*Lily’s parents are being attacked.*

*None of the others know.*

*It’s just me.*

... *I’m not supposed to fight in the Muggle world alone. That’s been Myrtle’s policy for raids from the beginning.*

He shook his head viciously as if to clear it.

*They’re Lily’s parents.*

*Fuck the rule.*

Breathing deeply, he shot off a patronus messenger to Myrtle requesting backup, hoping she’d be able to track his location through his regular tag somehow. He carefully applied his best approximation of the glamour Peadar Burke had put on him for his voyage to Belgium, before Disillusioning himself.

Cradling the tag tightly, he Apparated from the warehouse, trusting in Myrtle’s enchantments to take him to wherever his grandparents were.

xoXoXoXoXoXoX

*What?*
Harry’s jaw dropped when he saw his surroundings. Identical, tidy suburban homes flanked a winding lane.

To his left sat Number Four, Privet Drive, still and silent in the winter night.

*Are they visiting Petunia?* he wondered blankly.

There was a flash of sickly pink light in a second-floor window, and a strangled scream.

*Shit. The Death Eaters must already be inside the house. Shit.*

Harry barely managed to curb his instincts to barrel in and start fighting.

*Aye, that’s a damn fine way to get dead, lad,* Ab’s voice agreed.

Creeping around to the back entrance, he carefully cast the series of spells that would open a small hole through the haphazard alarm spells the Death Eaters had cast around the property. Once clear, he peered through a window into the deserted kitchen. A whispered *Alohomora* unlocked the door.

Harry moved into the dark hallway, relying on ten years’ experience rather than his eyes to guide his feet. Standing perfectly still, making no noise, in the space just in front of his old cupboard, he listened hard for footfalls in a strange parody of his childhood.

Muffled voices and heavy footfalls sounded above him. He knew all too well how to map out the movements of those above him by the creaks of the floorboards. *There’s a few people upstairs. None down here.*

Another cry of pain, this time in a familiar male voice that made his entire body cringe in recognition.

*Someone’s hurting Vernon.*

A revealing spell might tip the Death Eaters off to his presence so, heart thudding, he crept up the stairs, mindful of the trick step that would give him away.

*Some things you never forget.*

Just around the corner, one Death Eater was craning his neck towards the master bedroom, entirely too preoccupied to be an effective guard. Silently stunning him in the back, Harry attached his body to the wall with a sticking charm before he could fall to the floor.

Vernon howled.

A woman laughed.

*A woman?*

For a moment, all thoughts of his precarious position fled and he simply stood, blinking dumbly. On all the raiding parties he’d fought thus far, there had never been a female Death Eater.

*Apparently Voldemort’s more open-minded than I thought.*

“Not bad, maggot,” the woman praised, sounding reluctant. “I didn’t think a man of his size could *writhe* quite so well. Perhaps I misjudged you, Gryffindor!”

Petunia began shrieking.
“Leave him alone, you monsters!” Her cries were studded with gasps and tears. “And get out, get out of our home!”

Harry tightened his grip on his wand. *Christ, that was stupid, Petunia.*

*But now I know about where most of the people in the room are. And June and Harold definitely aren’t here.*

*Unless they’re dea—*

He shook his head sharply even as the woman’s mad voice turned gentle. “It’s your turn, “ she purred. “Make us all proud, little one, and earn the right to wear that mask.”

*“Cru—Crucio!”*

Petunia’s scream sounded as though it were rending her throat to pieces.

*Shit. Time’s up.*

Still Disillusioned, Harry burst into the master bedroom, dispassionately observing that Vernon was lying quite still in a growing puddle of gore, while Petunia thrashed at his side, her lavender nightgown streaked with her husband’s blood.

Without thinking Harry levelled a cutting curse at the throat of the man torturing Petunia. Her cries broke off as the man fell to the floor, choking out his lifeblood.

*“Bastard!”* the masked woman hissed, power now crackling in sharp fits and bursts, making her long curls a threatening halo. With a vicious jab she sent a furious Entrail-Expelling curse directly at Harry, who was forced to conjure a hasty shield even as he ducked.

*Shite, this one knows what she’s about. She can’t even see me—oh holy fuck!*  

The witch must have tracked his movements somehow, because with another shouted curse Petunia’s pink area rug morphed into a pool of molten lava. His eyes widened as the the witch sent it streaming towards him in a boiling pastel wave that melted the floorboards beneath it.

He hissed the waterspout charm—no one learned fire spells from Red Nora without knowing damn well how to put fires out—and scrambled blindly out of the way, slamming hard into the vanity behind him.

Despite the steam filling the room, the witch was already casting again. Suddenly two of the bureau’s drawers morphed into arm-like appendages which stretched around Harry’s chest and attempted to hold him fast. Burning welts erupted wherever they touched. Splinters dug into his skin.

His wandless Banishing charm sent the homicidal furniture hurtling through the wall and tumbling down the stairs. Rallying, he managed a sizzling chain of spells—*Bone Breaker—Fire Javelin—Blood Boiler*—all of which she parried or avoided, her shrill giggle like nails on a chalkboard.

*How is she doing this? She can’t even see me!*  

With a burst of frustration he aimed one of the sail-rigging spells he’d learned on *The Delight* at the Dursley’s bed linens. They flapped towards her from behind and wrapped tightly around her knees. The snarling woman overcorrected her balance and went crashing down next to the body of her fallen comrade.
A meaty crack resounded through the room when her head met the stout oak of the Dursley’s footboard.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the final Death Eater, who had frozen the moment fight started. Now that the witch was down, the man snapped to attention and promptly seemed to vanish from within his robes.

Something small scurried over Harry’s leg, a rattail disappearing around the corner of the open bedroom door.

*Wormtail.*

**WORMTAIL!**

Seething, murderous rage exploded through Harry’s veins. His magic pulsed and sparked, the Disillusionment spell cracking to nothing.

*Not again, goddammit, not again!* 

He clamored to his feet, muscles taut and poised for pursuit, his every thought on eradicating the man he now knew had betrayed his parents once again.

The rat’s claws whispered down the wood of the staircase and a wandless *Accio rat!* was half completed in his mind—

“*Freak!***

His shoulder sang in agony as Petunia smashed a crystal vase—which he vaguely remembered dusting every Sunday morning—across his chest.

He scrabbled to recover his balance. “Bloody fucking hell, woman, I’m *saving* you here!”

But Petunia seemed to have been driven beyond all logic. As he attempted to grasp her shoulders, she drew back an arm and punched him full in the face.

*Nice punch, Petunia,* he thought, dazed.

His aunt’s counterpart gasped in pain at her obviously broken hand, but she was already raising the other a second later.

A harsh whisper laced with fury cut across their struggles. “You…”

Petunia froze and Harry turned just in time to see the crazed witch rise to her feet, wand out, blood running in rivulets from under her mask. “You *dared* to kill a member of my house? *Rotagladiis!*”

Harry unceremoniously threw Petunia into a wall hard as the silver spell pinwheeled towards him. It caught his other shoulder as he ducked—the agony that blossomed in its wake made his other hurts fade to nothing.

Falling against the wall, he managed to shatter the woman’s leg with a sloppy blasting curse.

Faint pops of Apparition sounded outside.

She screeched in rage and crawled over to the body of the fallen Death Eater. Before he could blink, both were gone.
Grinding his teeth, he took the only safe course available before the rapid blood loss overwhelmed his system.

*Can’t let them have my blood. Myrtle always said…no evidence...*

A shaking flick of his wand vanished all traces of his blood from the room before he Apparated back to the warehouse.

xoxoxoxox

“What the hell, Harry?” Myrtle exclaimed as she rushed over to him and dispelled his glamour. “You don’t fucking go out on your own!”

The younger wizard’s head lolled while his blood continued to drench his torso. “So s’not you guys ’perated in, then?”

Myrtle cursed and began trying to remove his shirt. “Jesus, you could’ve splinched yourself like this…And no. I didn’t want to go until I had sufficient backup.” Her eyes scanned his body and she gulped. “Get Pierce here, now,” she called to someone over her shoulder. “Report, Mr. Aberforth. What happened?”

It was the strangeness of hearing Myrtle play the general in her high-pitched voice which snagged Harry’s flailing consciousness. “Tag triggered…Thought it was for ‘s all, but forgot I gave one to…someone else a while back. One a’ the first gens.”

Had Harry been more alert, he would have noticed Myrtle’s sharp look at that bit of information. Instead, he continued, fighting to remain awake. “Sent you the message…had to go. Four Death Eaters. Took one down. Not dead. Still there, I think. Another dead. Two ‘scaped. One woman. Said the dead one was...a relative, maybe? Not sure...”

“Muggle or magical house?”

His eyes couldn’t stay open. They just couldn’t. “Try *Vulnera Sanentur.* May work…”

Myrtle growled in frustration. “Dammit, Harry, I’m no healer. I’ll tell Pierce. Muggle or magical house?”

“…Muggle...” Harry whispered, his consciousness fleeing.

The petite woman’s hands were shaking. “Blood?”

He scrambled to understand. “Lots...but...vanished it.”

Suddenly Pierce’s face loomed over him, and then there was darkness.

xoxoxoxox

Two hours later, Harry was fully conscious again. Both this shoulders ached, though the right one the witch had hit throbbed far, far more painfully than the one Petunia had injured. He listened blearily to Pierce’s frank confession that he only had enough dittany to spare for an emergency treatment of the cursed shoulder.

“It’ll scar, kid.”
Harry would have shrugged if his shoulders weren’t on fire. Another scar didn’t fuss him much, even if his skin looked like it had been put through a meat grinder.

“Well, keep it clean and covered, let me know if it gets worse. Should be mostly healed within a week or so, but I’d stay away from the fighting for a bit.”

“Kay.”

Then Myrtle was back, her face a stony mask beneath the silver glint of her eyeglasses. “You’re done for the night. I’m taking you home. But believe me, we’ll be talking about this later, Harry.”

Harry nodded wearily. He’d been expecting no different.

Soon enough he had been Apparated to the Head and managed to drag himself upstairs in the pale light of the dawn.

When Harry pushed the door of his room open, Gideon looked up from his sitting position on the bed, his face a shuttered mystery.

“Where have you been? What the hell happened?”

Harry coughed and tried to ignore the feeling of tiny needles piercing his chest. “Someone…I know needed help. I had to go.”

The redhead scowled. “And you couldn’t take me? Merlin, Harry, you know I can fight well enough!”

What can I even say?

Gideon’s expression clouded. “You aren’t going to tell me, are you?”

Harry closed his eyes. “No,” he whispered. “I can’t. It’s not just my secret to tell…there’s people I have to protect.” The oath won’t let me anyway, even if I wanted to tell him about the Nines.

The other man’s frown deepened, but he said no more about it. “Well, are you okay at least? You look like hell.”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

Liar.

“I mean, I got kind of hurt, well, kind of badly, actually. But I’ve been to a Healer. On the mend, now.”

Gideon rose to steady him, his hands slowly removing his cloak. bloody cloak.

“Merlin,” he gasped at the sight of the wounds. Gid’s hands hovered over Harry’s shoulders, as though unsure if his touch would soothe or hurt.

“Let’s just…let’s just get you into bed, yeah?”

“Kay.”

Harry allowed himself to be maneuvered onto his back. Gideon’s hand continued to stroke his wrist, but somehow the bed felt just a bit colder than it had before he’d left.
The chapter’s title is a reference to the American home improvement television program of the same name that first aired in the winter of 1979.

**Note on homosexuality in 1970s Scotland:** I have underplayed social reactions against homosexuality in 1970s Great Britain, mostly because that issue is a quagmire I doubt I can successfully navigate. Although the Sexual Offenses Act of 1967 decriminalised homosexuality, both Gideon and Harry would still be breaking the law in at least two ways: 1) That law only decriminalised it for people over the age of 21, and 2) it only applied to Wales and England. For most of the U.K., legislation reduced the age of consent for homosexuality (and thus the decriminalization of it) to 16 in 2001.

**Rotagladiis:** literally "wheel of swords." I picture this as a Black family spell similar to Snape's *Sectumsempra*

Huge thanks to **Averagefish** for beta-ing this chapter! Definitely check out their time-travel story on fanfiction.net, *Not as Clever as He Thinks* (story id:12987401).

**Next on The Second String:** Some are putting things together, some are spying, some are having second thoughts, and some are *getting shit done* in Chapter 29, “Stained with Treason So Unkind.”
Two days later, Harry lumbered down the stairs to get breakfast going, despite the throbbing in his shoulder. Doc and Guin had covered the Head the whole day before, and the younger wizard knew they could do with a lie-in today.

He was lingering over his tea and eggs, mind blissedly blank for once, when a hesitant knock sounded on the Head’s main door.

“Door’s open, but we’re clos—”

The words died in his throat as Lily Evans walked in and quietly shut the door, her face grave. When she turned back around, Harry caught sight of a silver dog tag gripped tightly in her hand.

“Not good. Really very not good.”

“We need to talk, Harry.”

“Tea?” he managed.

“Tea?” he managed.

Shaking her head, Lily sat down across from him at the table. “My sister and brother-in-law were attacked the day before yesterday. Death Eaters.”

“Lily and the Order?”

Coldness took hold of him as her words sunk in.

“I had set some charms inside their house to let me know if someone magical ever came there. Illegal, I know. No matter. They woke me up—I didn’t actually know what was happening for a while. I’ve never felt wards triggered before. I thought it was a headache.” Her tone was simple and declarative, and Harry felt himself becoming even more nervous. “I arrived with some friends to find my sister tortured, an unconscious Death Eater stuck to a wall, and my brother-in-law dead.”

“It was Lily who I heard arriving. Lily and the Order?”

Coldness took hold of him as her words sunk in.

“Vernon didn’t make it.”

“Uncle Vernon’s dead.”

His hands felt numb and he wondered idly if he were in a dream.

“It’s March of 1979.”
... 

Dudley won’t be born for more than a year.

... 

Dudley Dursley will not exist in this world.

Harry tried to find his breath. *I don’t—I don’t know how to feel about this. I can’t—*

It suddenly occurred to him that he’d never wondered if Dudley had lived through the Dementor attack.

Heedless that her nephew had been wiped from existence, Lily went on in the same clipped tone. “I finally managed to calm my sister enough for her to tell me what happened. Apparently, four Death Eaters broke into the house. Petunia then activated this,” she placed the dog tag on the table, “as she had been instructed to by my mother.”

Tension filled the silence between them. His numbness was burned away by mounting anxiety.

Lily watched him carefully before continuing. “When I called my mother in Europe, she confirmed that she’d passed it on to my sister, since Petunia refused to leave Britain. Mum said she got it from a glamoured young man on the boat she took to Belgium. A glamour that matched the description Petunia gave me of the person who saved her.”

His eyes couldn’t seem to stop blinking.

“This was the same man who knew to call me ‘This Year’s Head Girl.’ He said it to my parents.”

*Damn damn damn*

“So I’m wondering. If I were to check your chest—where Petunia said the man who saved her was wounded—would I find injuries?”

He braced himself. *Fuck. This is just like with Alice.* “Yeah. Yeah, I daresay you would, Lily.”

Her eyes glinted at him like chips of pale green ice. His wand slipped into his hand under the table.

A deep breath rattled through her. “Then thank you, Harry.” She reached out and gripped his hand. Suddenly her words were tumbling out. *Thank you. I don’t know, I can’t understand why you gave that tag to my mum and dad but, I—I won’t forget what you did for us.”*

He gaped at her dumbly. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but this wasn’t it.

His head seemed to be trying to nod and shake at the same time, words dragging themselves out of his throat without his mind having a say. “It just…just seemed the thing to do. I—well, actually I forgot all about it until it activated.”

Lily nodded absently and toyed with the tag’s chain. “You should know that someone I knew was,” she paused, her hands gesturing helplessly. “Someone I knew was there. Taking part.”

*She...she knows? She knows Wormtail was there! How?* 

“She’s she knows? She knows Wormtail was there! How?* 

“His name was Regulus.”

*Huh?*
Who?

Who the fuck is Regulus?

“He wasn’t a friend,” she rushed on. “He’s Sirius Black’s younger brother. A sixth year. I guess he was home for the Easter hols. We interrogated the Death Eater that was left alive, and he said that Regulus was supposed to torture Petunia and then kill her. Regulus was attacked before he could see that part all the way through. Petunia confirmed that it was the smaller one—Regulus—who tortured her at the order of a Death Eater we’re positive is Bellatrix Lestrange. Sirius’ cousin.”

Harry hadn’t really registered anything after ‘Sirius’ younger brother.’

“Bro—brother? What? Sirius has a brother? I… I didn’t know Sirius has a brother…”

It was with only half an ear that he listened to Lily give a short account of Sirius’ family. Christ, they sound like the Malfoys only crazier, but oh God, oh fuck, I didn’t mean to kill Sirius’ brother!

The look on his face must have worried her. “Harry—hey, Harry! Listen to me,” she commanded. “Regulus was using an Unforgivable on my sister. From what little we got from the prisoner, my family was picked as a way to get at Sirius. Y’know, hurt him by hurting his Mudblood friend’s relatives.”

Harry dumbly shook his head at the strangeness of the Dursleys being attacked by Death Eaters because of Sirius.

“And I guess the Blacks are furious that I would dare raise my wand against their Dark Lord.” Lily added, eyes glinting. “For that they attacked my family in their beds—my helpless family. I—I don’t think you should feel guilty for killing him.”

She breathed heavily and ran an upset hand through her hair. “Look, I’m grateful to you, and so are my parents. Granted, telling Sirius it was you who killed Regulus is a really bad idea, but even he knows that Regulus put himself in the position that led to, well…you know.”

Harry barely heard her, half of his mind still stuck on the fact that Sirius even had a brother, let alone that he himself had killed him.

I’m sorry, Sirius. I’m so sorry…

It’s just so much easier when they’re nothing more than masks. When they have names, when they’re real people…. His stomach roiled dangerously.

Lily snapped her fingers in his face. “Harry—stop freaking out! It’s okay!”

When he met her eyes again, she plowed on. “Look, the fourth Death Eater, the one who killed Petunia’s husband, the survivor didn’t see him without his mask, and didn’t know his name. Can you identify him? Please, it’s important.”

Everything seemed to slow down, but at least he could think of something other than--r.

Yes. I bloody well can identify him.

He’s your friend! Peter-fucking-Pettigrew!

The words were there, ready and waiting.
But what if she doesn’t believe me?

I can say I saw him transform…

This was an initiation. He won’t have the Mark yet.

His voice cracked through the dryness of his throat. “He was masked.” Harry licked his lips again. “What happened to the Death Eater that survived?”

Lily scowled. “Jugson. Dumbledore and the Longbottoms interrogated him. But it’s against the law to use Veritaserum on someone unless they’re accused of murdering or trying to murder a magical. They arrested him, of course, but he wasn’t marked and will probably get off on an Imperius defense or some rot.” Her disgust blanketed the table. “Alice thinks he’ll be out by the end of the week.”

And how likely is it that Pettigrew would weasel out of this if I point you in his direction?

I want to tell you…

But he knew now he wouldn’t. He’d be admitting to playing the vigilante and would have to cobble together a reason for being at the Dursleys’ in the first place. And Peter would just be on the streets again with days.

“Oh…well, thanks for letting me know, I guess.” Harry looked at his mother. “Did you—are you going to tell anyone what I did?”

“I suppose...” she said slowly, twirling a lock of her hair. “I suppose I don’t see the need. My family owes you for this, and I’m grateful. I’d like to tell James, but he’d just tell Sirius. That’s...that’s not a good idea.”

He let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“But Harry, I know you know about the Order what with Gideon and all, and I know Dumbledore likes you. And you seem to want to help. Honestly, why don’t you just join?”

Harry opened his mouth--but he didn’t know what to say. He was already spying for Dumbledore, and his lover was a member. The time Dumbledore had Obliviated him stood out in his mind, of course. But after so many months working with the Nines, he had to admit that he wouldn’t even blink if Myrtle had Gigi Obliviate someone to protect the rest of the group.

We all have our own priorities. It doesn’t make what Dumbledore did right, but it doesn’t make what I’m doing with the Nines right either.

It’s just a question of which wrongs we can live with.

With a start, he realized he finally understood why Dumbledore had thought it necessary to Obliviate him.

Alice said I hadn’t given them a reason to trust me, and she wasn’t wrong about that.

Maybe…maybe he should join the Order. He wanted more than anything to defeat Voldemort, and working directly with Dumbledore’s group could be another step towards that.
As he bit his lip, the sound of a familiar snort sounded in his mind.

But... I don’t think that Ab would want me to join.

Suddenly it was all just too much for one morning. He needed to get away, needed to think.

“I…I dunno,” he finally said. “I guess I should think about joining, maybe.”

“Sure…” The young woman nodded slowly, as though she sensed that her questions had shaken Harry more than she had expected. She held up the tag. “I’m giving this back to my mum. I’ve managed to get Petunia to them on the continent. It still works, right?”

“Yeah. All she has to do is touch it and say ‘help,’ and it’ll notify me.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Well, then I think it’s best if you hand over yours as well. I appreciate what you did, but I’d feel better monitoring my own family.”

“Oh…yeah, ‘course that’s fine,” Harry stammered. He detached its companion from the chain around his neck, making sure it was the right one. “Just, uh, just be careful with it. I don’t think they’re strictly legal.”

Tucking it into her pocket, she rolled her eyes. “Obviously. But,” she smiled ruefully, “breaking the rules can be rather exciting, can’t it?”

“Says the member of a vigilante organization,” Harry quipped, dragging himself out of his thoughts enough to be amused at his own hypocrisy.

“Excuse me? We have Aurors in the Order!” she responded with her nose in the air, though her eyes were bright. “I’ll have you know that makes us the very best sort of illegal there is.”

Lily’s feigned indignance reminded him sharply of the far more priggish girl she’d once been. “It’s kinda funny, isn’t it?” he wondered aloud, “The first time I met you at Hogwarts, you despised me because I killed someone. And now here you are, thanking me for doing the same.”


He gave her an awkward little wave and stared at the door long after it had closed behind her.

xoxoxox

Harry bit his lip and rapped on the door, wavering between knocking softly enough to reflect the lateness of the hour, and loudly enough to actually be heard.

All day he’d felt smothered by emotions he didn’t have the right names for. His mind couldn’t stop dwelling on Sirius’—his Sirius’—stricken face, couldn’t stop seeing a boy, whom he imagined as a dark-haired Draco Malfoy, bleeding to death on the Dursleys’ floor.

What I did wasn’t wrong! one voice would remind him.

But it wasn’t all that right, was it? another would insist.

He’d gotten used to having to kill people. Everyone in the Nines had.

But this isn’t about killing people. This is about killing Sirius’ brother.
At one point during the blur of a day, he’d started to wonder just how many people he’d killed, and how many would never be born because of his actions. *I’ve probably wiped people out of existence by killing one of their parents, haven’t I? They’re just...gone. How many students, gone like Dudley?*

So now he found himself on the stoop of the clock shop at two in the morning, shivering in threadbare pajamas and drowning in his own thoughts.

He knocked again.

A very disheveled Fabian wrenched the door open, his chevron mustache sticking out at all angles. Wiping sleep from his eyes, he gave Harry a flat look. “C’mon, seriously? He’s already in bed.”

“I know. But—” Harry scratched his face awkwardly. “I’m freaking out because I lied to Lily about something important and I killed my godfather’s brother and I can’t sleep and I just want to see him even though I know he’s upset I didn’t tell him what happened the other night—which sounded completely mental. “Please.”

Fabian sighed dramatically, but motioned him in. He waved away the stuttered apology and trundled up the stairs, Harry following awkwardly behind.

While the elder Prewett stumbled back into his own bedroom, Harry watched Gideon sleeping through his open door before softly calling his name.

“Whazzit?”

“Can I—can I stay here tonight? Please?”

Gideon cracked an eye open and stared at him blearily. “H’rry?” A moment later he held up the covers.

Relieved, Harry slid in beside his boyfriend, closing his eyes as an arm curled around him.

“S’late.” Gideon yawned. “You okay?”

Burrowing into the warmth of the bed, he stared at the wall. “No.”

The hold on him tightened. “Wanna talk ‘bout it?”

“Yeah, but...”

*I really, really do.*

The other man sighed into the silence.

Harry closed his eyes and traced his fingers over Gideon’s knuckles.

Time passed to the beat of all the words they didn’t say.

He watched the wall for a while longer, his mind buzzing with everything and nothing at the same time, feeling his breathing even out to match his lover’s. “Gideon?”

“Hmm?”

“Can we...can we go flying together sometime?” Where the hell did that come from? “It would be —”
Normal. Simple. Unstained by all this shit.

“—nice.”

Gideon huffed sleepily in what seemed to be an affirmative.

“Thanks.”

Eventually Gideon’s breaths slowed and deepened. The minutes stretched into hours as Harry stared at the wall.

Exhaustion pressed in on him and he wanted to sleep, but his mind wouldn’t stop dwelling on Vernon and Petunia, of all people.

They were wretched, disgusting sods here as well, so far as he knew. But they’d been sleeping together, nestled in their bed (his mind staunchly avoided envisioning that), just like he and Gideon were. They’d gone to bed in peace, making plans, expecting tomorrows together.

Fury, dense and cold, swelled in him.

Regulus’ life was forfeit the moment he decided to steal that from them.

Harry blinked when he realised he truly believed that, when he realised he didn’t care about Regulus Black.

I’m...yeah, I’m freaking out because I did something that’s hurt Sirius.

His lip was nearly bleeding from being chewed so much.

But that’s not on me, is it? That’s on them. They’re the ones who decided to attack the Dursleys, not me.

They’re the ones who really hurt Sirius.

Gideon snuffled in his sleep as Harry nodded to himself.

I can live with this as well.

With that, he shifted even closer to Gideon and let himself fall asleep.

xoxoxox

27 March, 1979

His boyfriend shook him awake the next morning. “Harry? It’s half-ten. You should get up if you want to make the match.”

Match? He cracked an eye open. “What’re you on about?”

“Well, you can’t fly with that shoulder. So how about today’s Magpies—Wanderers match?”

Harry stared at the two tickets in Gideon’s hand. The Wanderers’ logo, a silver cleaver, was chasing a black magpie across them, until the bird managed to nab it in a talon. “How did you—? So fast?”

Pink tinged the other man’s face as he shrugged. “I know a guy.”

“You know a guy?” Harry couldn’t stop the giggle that escaped him.
Gideon sniffed with exaggerated dignity. “Yeah. I know a guy.” A moment later, the pretense cracked into a broad grin. “So, wanna go?”

Harry was already casting hurried cleansing charms on his rumpled clothing. Even in his original world he’d never seen a League game. “Hell yes!”

The pair Apparated to what appeared to be a bus stop in a Muggle housing development. Gideon quickly led a very confused Harry around the nearest house to a back garden surrounded by a towering hedgerow.

“It’s just like the barrier at King’s Cross,” he explained as he walked straight into the hedge and disappeared.

Harry just barely stopped himself from following. *I never rode the Hogwarts Express in this world.*

A moment later his boyfriend popped out with an apologetic smile. Linking their arms together, they walked through the insubstantial hedges and onto—

—a broad cobblestoned plaza filled with vendors peddling all manner of trinkets and treats to the thronging crowd. Beyond rose a huge stone stadium adorned at the ground level with marble statues of Quidditch heroes of the past. The statues waved enthusiastically to the crowds, some even hopping out of their alcoves to sign autographs.

A gaggle of children ran between the two men and a nearby quartet of musicians struck up a jaunty tune, but Harry barely noticed.

Sprawling letters carved above the soaring entry arch proclaimed that this was *Dudley Road Stadium, Home of the Wigtown Wanderers Since 1674.* (*)

He stared in horror at its name, wondering if the universe was stepping in just to make sure that that no day was *too* good for him.

“Want to grab a few beers on the way in?” Gideon called as he bought them each Wanderers scarves from a nearby peddler.

The red-and-silver stripes clashed outrageously with both his hair and the wind-blown flush on his cheeks. The sourness in his stomach dissipated.

*Oh, fuck off universe. Today’s for me.*

“Sure!” he grinned back.

xoxoxox

Four hours later, Harry was lounging in his seat as the stadium grew ever emptier, his mind buzzing pleasantly from the over-priced stouts they’d spent the match drinking.

The whole thing had been *brilliant.* Sure, it lacked the extravagance of the Quidditch World Cup, but the entire game had been neck-in-neck until the Wanderers’ Seeker just barely edged ahead of Magpies’ for the win.

He felt giddy with a bubbly sort of lightness that had nothing to do with the stouts. Gideon had his arm draped lazily around him, his beer was cold, and the sun was on his face.

*Yeah. This was a brilliant idea.*
“I didn’t realise how much I miss Quidditch,” Harry mused. “We shouldn’t have waited so long to come to a game.”

The other man nodded. “I miss playing.”

Harry sputtered in shock at that. “Wait, you—”

“Beater for a few years. Wanted to be a Chaser, but I’m too big.” He leaned in with a smirk. “It drove Fabe crazy when he didn’t make the squad. ‘Course, he only wanted on the team as a way to get into girls’ knickers.”

“And you obviously did it for love of the game?”

“Obviously,” Gideon agreed solemnly. “Well, that and getting into Tor Tuckett’s pants.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Tor Tuckett? As in ‘Lead Chaser for the Wanderers’ Tor Tuckett?”

The redhead broke into a sheepish grin. “Well, I did say I know a guy.”

He couldn’t decide whether to continue gaping or laugh. “That’s—Tuckett? Seriously?”

His boyfriend looked both embarrassed and more than a little pleased. “Jealous?”

Sitting back, Harry could only shake his head with an incredulous smile. “A little, maybe. But honestly…I’m more impressed. Tuckett! I mean, wow.”

“I’m sure he’ll have a litter of equally attractive children with his new wife,” Gideon laughed.

A troop of house-elves clad in Wanderers-themed tea towels appeared on the emptied lower tiers.

“You know, I miss playing too,” he remarked wistfully. “I’ve gone so long without it, I’d almost forgotten….”

“You played?”

“Mm-hmm. Seeker. I was…actually, I was pretty damn good.” He smiled at the memory of catching the Snitch from under Malfoy’s nose. “Though that Abercrombie woman on the Wanderers would eat me for breakfast.”

The arm around his uninjured shoulder pulled him closer. The two men fell into a comfortable silence, watching the sun shine down on the empty stadium.

“I like it when you tell me real things,” Gideon suddenly said.

Harry’s stomach started to sink at his foolish lapse. “I can’t believe I gave that away!” But the warmth of Gideon’s body and the honesty in his voice stilled his panic.

“I’ll be more careful from now on. I will.

But fuck it, I’m taking the day off.

And…and I like it when I tell him real things too.

xoxoxox

29 March, 1979
Two days later, Dalcop and Nappy were sleeping with their heads on the bar, reminding Harry of Dean and Seamus having a kip during History of Magic. Pel looked close to joining them as Harry flicked his wand to get the chairs on the tables.

Charming the mop, he rubbed his still-aching shoulder with a grimace. Thankfully, Poppy had come through and given him more dittany, which had sped the healing process along significantly. Granted, the Hogwarts matron had been furious he had hadn’t come straight to her. It was only because a worried Guin had sent her an owl that Poppy even knew about the injury.

His ears had rung from that meeting for nearly a day but, on the upside, his promise to have lunch with her soon saw the matron not scowling too much when she’d left.

She wasn’t the only woman angry with him.

Myrtle had shown up, her cheeks pink with simmering rage, and threatened to sideline him if he dared respond to a tag without backup again.

Of course, he knew as well as she did that she wouldn’t actually follow through on the threat—there just weren’t enough members of the Nines to start benching available fighters.

She’s arsed because I scared her. She was worried about me.

It was really kind of sweet.

As Harry started guiding the mop underneath the sleeping barflies, Pel blinked and looked around in some confusion.

“Cls’n’ time already, then?”

“Long past. We’re not too far from dawn. You all just look so cute and innocent when you’re sleeping that I hate to wake you.”

Pel snorted and cracked his neck. “Argh, I should’a drank more tonight. I’m entirely too sober.”

Harry raised a brow. With a flick of his wand he sent the mop to the corner and drew the man another beer. “On the house, then.”

The old solicitor perked up some at that. “Cheers.” Drinking deeply, Pel eyed him. “You’ve been pensive this week, my friend. Care to share?”

Pel’s the one person left in the world who I can actually talk to about this stuff.

And he probably won’t laugh at this, at least.

He smiled tightly.

“Uh, yeah, actually….It’s just something that happened a few days ago.” Harry double-checked to make sure the other barflies were completely asleep, threw up a privacy charm, and then activated the charms that protected the Head when it was closed.

Taking a deep breath, he launched into describing the fight at the Dursleys’ home.

“…So I killed my godfather’s brother, and then I could have just told Lily something so that she would suspect Pettigrew, but I didn’t.”

He poured himself a shot of Firewhiskey and flopped down next to Pel. “I mean, all I had to say was
that the last Death Eater was an animagus who turned into a rat, and this whole thing could have come out. But I just didn’t.”

Pel sat back and lit one of his Muggle cigarettes with his wandless *Incendio*. “Well, first off I suppose you need to ask yourself why you did that. Because you don’t trust her, or because you think she won’t be able to get Pettigrew caught? Or do you just want to kill him yourself?”

*Your dad…your dad would have spared me, Harry.*

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “In my world, Mum and Dad chose poorly, and it got them killed. So…maybe I’m scared they won’t believe it? And then there’s the other Death Eater who’s probably going to get off. Dumbledore and Aurors interrogated him and everything, and he’s still going to get away with it! I can’t let that happen with Wormtail, not again. I just…I need to be sure that he can’t hurt them or anyone else.”

“It sounds to me like you’re scared of trusting other folks to get the job done.”

“Yeah…I guess.” The younger wizard rubbed his temples. “I remember when I convinced Sirius and Professor Lupin not to kill him that night. I really thought it was the right thing to do, and in the end it just led to Riddle being brought back.”

Harry sighed.

“It’s… it’s just so tempting to be compassionate, I guess. Too compassionate. And I don’t know if Lily and James know that yet. I mean, this is a war we’re fighting.” Nervous energy pooled under his skin. “But, fuck, Pel, I killed Sirius’ brother. I just, I don’t—I can’t stand the thought that I…” He put his head in his hands. “I dunno, Pel.”

Pel nodded, his eyes on the smoke rising from his cigarette. “I don’t rightly think I can decide anything for you. Tell them about Pettigrew, or don’t tell them. Just remember that you gotta live with your choice, my friend.” He clasped Harry’s shoulder. “But, for what it’s worth, I don’t think you can fault yourself for killing the Black boy. It ain’t nice, sure. But none of this is nice. An’ I’d rather it be him than you.

“Now,” he sat up straighter with a low grunt, “you didn’t ask my opinion on this, but I’m going to give it. You said your mum thought you should join the Order. I’m thinking you should consider it.”

“What? Seriously? I thought you didn’t like Dumbledore.”

“I don’t. Not much, at least, though I’ve never thought him a bad man. I worked with great men at the Ministry, an’ I’ve had my fill of them, is all. An’ some of your Dumbledore’s actions, from your old place, I mean…well, I don’t think much of them at all.” Pel motioned for Harry to refill his glass. “But, you should ask yourself how much this Dumbledore has really done to you, an’ how much you might be able to do for this war with him and his.”

Harry thought back. Yes, there was the Obliviation, and he really didn’t like some of the ways that Albus had ‘helped’ him when he was on trial. Generally, though, his actions were… understandable. *Hell, other than thinking I’m Voldemort’s kid, our last meeting almost felt like one from my old universe.*

Pel nodded. “Good, I can see you’re thinking about it. An’ think on this as well. Ab was a damn good man, but his issues with Dumbledore stemmed from way back. No matter how much you loved Ab, you shouldn’t borrow another man’s baggage, Harry. In this life, you’ll get enough of your own.” Pel’s eyes grew soft, but his voice was firm. “You don’t have to be Ab’s man in everything.
Hell, even he wouldn’t want that.”

A part of Harry wanted to rebel against his friend’s words, but another part wondered if the man had a real point.

“And,” the solicitor continued, “joining the Order would give you an excuse to actually get to know your parents, or as close as you’ll ever get to them. I understand why you avoided them your first year here, but you’ve been keeping your distance long past the time you needed to do that. Maybe it’s because they don’t live up to your dreams, maybe not, but I’d be gutted if you missed your chance an’ realized it too late.”

Harry gaped at the man. “I haven’t—I mean, I don’t—”

Wait.

Why haven’t I tried to get to know them? It’s always Lily who comes to me here, and that’s not a regular thing. I haven’t spoken more than a sentence to James since the Hogsmeade raid last year.

Pel lit another cigarette. “Just think on it, for your own sake.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I will.” He shook his head, a bemused smile on his lips. “Thanks Pel. You’re good at this.”

“Yep. Now, get me another drink. Since I’m doing your job playing the wise adviser at the bar tonight, I get to drink free.”

xoxoxox

31 March, 1979

The Head was teeming with nearly double the regular numbers that Saturday night. Once again the White Wyvern had been raided and the thirsty denizens of Knockturn turned their hopes for drink and revelry towards Hogsmeade.

Doc hovered protectively whenever Guin came up to deliver food, and Harry had already snapped his Fire Whip twice to stave off brawls. Some bloke who looked a bit like Sirius had taken it upon himself to start singing for the crowd. At some point a hulking man who looked half-troll whipped out a guitar from God-knows-where and joined him.

The singer wasn’t complete rubbish, but after thirty minutes of his music Harry rather wished that whoever had just lobbed the turnip at the man’s head had better aim.

It was into such simmering tension that a very…odd man walked at half-ten. He made a beeline for Harry, his elegant stride contrasting sharply with his appearance.

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The man’s robes had the tatty, well-used look of most of the clothing worn by the Head’s regulars. Harry frowned, however, as he realized that the material itself was far too fine, the lines too flattering, and the patches—seriously, are those silk patches?—almost artfully arranged.

So also the smudge of what he assumed was ash from a Floo, which stretched across one of the man’s cheekbones as though it had been applied with an eye towards highlighting his bone structure. His features were entirely forgettable—brown hair, brown eyes, late-twenties—but he walked as though he expected every eye in the pub to turn towards him appreciatively.

“You there!” He looked down his nose at Harry. “I require the rental of a room.”
“Sure.” *There’s something familiar about his voice.* “You can have Room Six, last door down the hall upstairs. Will you being wanting an hourly or nightly rate?”

“Hourly,” the man bit out through gritted teeth.

Harry raised an eyebrow. *Damn, calm down. No judgment here, mate.* “If you want food or drinks sent to the room, just let us know.”

“I shall require no…fare from this establishment. Two associates will be arriving shortly. Do direct them to me.” He sniffed as he brushed imaginary lint from his lapel.

Withholding a snort at the man’s tone and the *interesting* evening he was apparently planning, Harry simply took his coins and held out the key to the Gray Room. As the man moved to take it, his outer robe fell open momentarily, revealing a long encased wand strapped to his belt.

*Oh, no bloody way.*

The wand was topped with an elegant silver serpent.

*Great disguise, Lucius, but you shouldn’t use such distinctive accessories if you don’t want to be recognized, you stupid sod.*

The glamoured Lucius Malfoy turned without a word and moved smoothly through the public room, his lip curled.

Harry waited until the man was halfway up the stairs before heading casually towards the kitchen, where he quickly shut the door and turned to Guin.

“Lucius Malfoy’s here, disguised. He just rented the Gray Room. Says he’s expecting friends.”

A wolfish grin flashed back at him. “Well, go back to the pub and send them up! I’ll get Ariana to turn the radio on and we’ll see what the insipid little ponce has to say.”

“What? No, I wanted to stay and listen in, why don’t *you* go—”

A long rowan wand digging into his cheek cut him off. “Oi! Pregnant, bored, and Slytherin here! *I* get to be the spymaster, not you. You hear me? It’s the only fun I can *have* any more!”

“Well, I mean—”

Guin narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice to a threatening purr. “‘I’m the spymaster here. *Right, Harry?*”

He backed towards the door, hands raised in surrender. “Yes, yes, okay! You’re the spymaster. Spymaster Guin. *Sheesh.*”

A pleased smile spread across her face. “Great, so long as we’re in agreement. I’ll let you know what they say. Ari, dear, grab your fedora. We’ve got a case!”

xoxoxox

Not much later, a sallow-faced woman who nonetheless boasted the haughty confidence of beauty stalked into the pub and demanded to be shown to the room her associate had let. She was followed by a man with unfortunate nose hair and shoes polished to a mirror-shine.

Business was booming though, so it took Harry a few hours to drop into the kitchen for a visit with
the self-appointed spymaster, long after Malfy had turned in the key and left with a final sniff of disdain.

“Well?” he asked without preamble.

Guin and the portrait both turned to him with cat-got-the-canary smiles. He kept himself from commenting on the fact that Ariana now sported a dark fedora. *God, next thing I know, she’ll be wrapped in a trench coat.*

“Well,” Guin began, “the woman was Lenore Rosier—Lenore Travers now. She was a Slytherin in the year below mine, and her family’s definitely in *His* pocket. The man was Malfy’s old mate Phlegyas Parkinson. Definitely a Death Eater. Anyway,” she licked her lips with relish, “quite a big bug has crawled up dear Lucius’ bum. He’s terrified.”

Harry smirked. “I’m guessing a terrified Malfy is the very best sort of Malfy.”

“Maybe….Look, you have to read this. I set a spelled quill to take down everything exactly. It’s…it’s not what I expected, to be honest.”

Harry scanned the parchment quickly. *Let’s see….Being a smarmy git…purebloods’re awesome …’when my father heard about this,’ Seriously?…Mudbloods blah, blah, blah…more smarmy gittishness— “The fuck?”*

He sat down heavily in one the kitchen’s chairs.

Guin eyed him. “You got to the ‘have you considered,’ part then?”

He nodded absently, eyes glued to the parchment. “He seriously asks them if they’ve considered whether or not following the Dark Lord is in the best interest of their families? *Lucius bloody Malfy* is having doubts about Voldemort?” It seemed impossible; he remembered all too well that the man had been devoted enough to unleash a bloody basilisk in his own kid’s school.

“Keep reading. He’s going mental over Regulus Black dying on his initiation raid, even though I guess Bellatrix was acting independently there. She wanted to fast-track Black, and apparently suspected some other wanna-be Death Eater of being a spy. Anyway, Malfy’s wife is Regulus Black’s cousin— “

Harry nearly missed the next bit, as he was quite occupied with realising that Sirius and *Draco Malfy* were related

“—and apparently half the Blacks aren’t quite so keen on the Dark Lord now that their little heir’s six feet down—”

He cringed a bit at that, but Guin was plowing on.

“But the shocker is coming up.”

His jaw slowly dropped as ink on parchment glared back up at him.

**Lenore Travers**: You cannot truly be considering a break with the Dark Lord, Lucius. The littlest Black knew the risks, as did his family. He simply wasn’t good enough. Such a loss is hardly a reflection of the Dark Lord’s efficacy. Truly, the loss should be attributed to Bellatrix’s recklessness.

**Lucius Malfy**: Listen to me, Lenore. Neither of you have been in His presence for any period of time in ages. I have. I know. You were at Gringotts, Phlegyas, surely you felt it. Fine! Say nothing. I
know you did, the same as I, the same as the rest of us. He’s done something, drawn on magics that I fear ought not be drawn on. Have either of you even seen him unclad in the last few years? I did. Once, last week. All beauty is gone from him—

**Lenore Travers:** Shut up, Lucius. You speak things that should not be spoken, you know this.

**Lucius Malfoy:** Damn it, Lenore! Something is wrong. I fear we have thrown our lots in with a monster and—

**Phlegyas Parkinson:** You’re treading closely towards treason, Lucius.

**Lucius Malfoy:** I’d rather treasonous words than a faithful death. I doubt that he cares about any of his followers at this point. All his time is spent in secret study.

**Phlegyas Parkinson:** That’s not true. You know that he’s been orchestrating getting us into position in the Ministry, and we’ve had to maintain quiet on that front—

**Lucius Malfoy:** Yes, but why? First we were to focus on Diagon, but you saw how that turned out. Our dead outnumbered theirs, and yet he still acted as though it were a success but for the lucky shots of those foolhardy sycophants. Yes, now all our attention is on the Ministry, yet we know nothing of why we’re doing what we’re doing. Meanwhile, it took us weeks to convince him to hold off on raids since our initiates kept failing to return. Weeks! How many children of noble stock did he throw away even as so few of the vermin died? And now he’s—

**Lenore Travers:** I can listen to no more to this. We are committed, Lucius. You know this. You know what your mark means.

The last few inches continued in much the same vein.

Harry sat back thoughtfully. “What do you think he means, that bit about Voldemort—oh don’t shudder Guin—having done something that freaks even Malfoy out?”

“No idea…You can’t tell from the transcript, but Malfoy sounded well and truly petrified.” She chewed her lip thoughtfully. “It was weird, honestly. Lucius was a ridiculous, puffed-up little shit in school, but he was never stupid, and rarely afraid.”

“Yeah…” He mulled over Malfoy’s words. “Afraid enough to even consider turning against Voldemort. I’d never have thought it possible. So…” Green eyes met blue ones. “So this is probably pretty awful for us, isn’t it?”

Guin could only shrug.

“I’ll Floo to Dumbledore and give him a copy of the transcript. This—all this, the Ministry, Gringotts—that isn’t something to fuck around with.”

“Yeah, Harry. Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

xoxoxox

4 April, 1979

Harry was chuckling with Pel over Caff Burke’s latest letter on a mild April evening a few days later. Apparently the Captain was besotted with the men of Polynesia, who were helping him “bear the heartache” caused by Harry’s “ill-advised flirtation with monogamy.”
Berk, he smiled to himself.

A second later the smile abruptly slid from his face, his heart pumping too fast.

Wormtail.

The young man had followed Remus Lupin into the Head and was taking a seat with his fellow Marauder at a front table, heedless to the seething glare Harry was trying to school off his face.

Up at the bar, Pel had noticed Harry stiffen and was following his gaze.

What am I going to do?

He spent the next hour on autopilot, taking orders, smiling at the few patrons in the pub, and making small talk with the regulars, all the while keeping himself keenly aware of Wormtail’s location.

At half-eight, Loch and some other werewolves came in, and Lupin moved to join their table. Pettigrew stood to come settle his tab with Guin.

He’s leaving. He’ll be alone.

His pulse thrummed in anticipation.

What am I going to do?

Pel sighed. “Harry, lad, you said you’d come to my flat to help me with that blasted Muggle coffee maker I got from Eloise, remember? Got time for that now?”

What the hell? Kinda busy here, Pel!

He may want to throttle him, but Harry also trusted the old solicitor. “Er, yeah—hey Doc, you two got the pub while I, um, help this old fool?”

Less than a minute later, Harry Flooed with Pel to what appeared to be the man’s run-down, book-filled flat.

“What the hell is this about? Pettigrew was right th—”

“Alibi,” the other man grunted. “You need one if you’re going after him. Now you got one, an’ everyone saw you leave before him. But hustle now back to the village if following him is what you’re after.”

What am I going to do?

The question was a pointless sop to pretending a moral crisis. Harry knew exactly what he was going to do.

Gratitude for Pel’s foresight filled him, and he clasped the man on the shoulder.

“Go on then. An’ don’t be stupid, my friend. Whatever you do, get your arse here in less than an hour so you can go back to the Head with me.”

Harry nodded absently and Apparated to a dark corner of Low Street.

xoxoxox
Twenty-five minutes later, he was joking with the barflies about Pel’s inability to correctly plug in a machine and locate an ‘on’ button.

The night never got very busy, and he, just as he usually did, spent his time chatting with the patrons. Meanwhile Guin rested her aching feet by sitting with the werewolves and talking about all things culinary with Loch. Lupin looked very amused by the addition to their group.

At midnight Harry bid good night to Doc, who was set to close the pub, and headed up to his bedroom, just as he usually did.

No one in the inn heard the soft pop of Apparation when he departed out the back for Myrtle’s warehouse.

He had a date with a rat.

Capturing the man had been laughably easy, almost as though the universe were attempting to make up for the ridiculous cluster of flukes that had facilitated Pettigrew’s escape back in Harry’s third year.

Pettigrew had been headed for the little neighborhood of flats to the southwest of the Head off Low Street—whether because he lived in one or was going to visiting an acquaintance, Harry didn’t know—and the street had been dark and deserted.

He’d Disillusioned himself and simply waited until Wormtail was walking in a shadowed part of the street. When he was only a few feet away, Harry hit him with a quiet Stupefy, caught his body before it could fall, and Disapparated with him to the parking lot behind Myrtle’s warehouse. A Feather-Light and second Disillusionment charm later, and Harry was lugging an unconscious, invisible Peter Pettigrew into the Nines’ headquarters.

He’d wanted to just kill the man and be done with it, but he had to know, had to hear from Pettigrew himself why he’d decided to attack Lily’s family.

Myrtle had not been pleased, but she had listened to him. After shooing out the few other Nines in the warehouse, she’d allowed him to take Wormtail into the sealed interrogation room.

“What the hell, Harry?” she’d burst out when he’d lifted the Disillusionment charm on the man. “That’s Pettigrew, right? Isn’t he in the fucking Order?”

“Yeah. But he’s also the fourth Death Eater that was at the raid in Surrey earlier this week. He’s a rat animagus, and I saw him transform.”

“So you’re thinking he’s a traitor?”

“Both he and the Death Eater I killed had connections to the Muggles in the house through Lily Evans—James’ Potter’s girlfriend. Pettigrew’s the one who killed Evan’s brother-in-law that night. Would Dumbledore really have one of his spies go that far?”

“Shit.”

“Can I use the room, then?”

A searching look was followed by a sigh. “Come back late tonight.”

And now as he re-entered the warehouse several hours later, he found Myrtle waiting for him, her expression serious.
“You really have to do this, don’t you?” There was no humor in her laugh. “Nevermind. No need to answer that.” The enchantress swore under her breath. “Shit. Yes. This one time I’ll let you use the room for yourself. But I’ll be on the other side of the warehouse not seeing a damn thing when you do it. I’m in this to help Muggleborn and stick it to those bastard purebloods, not to start a war with Dumbledore. You hear me?”

Harry winced.

Dumbledore had taken him seriously and thanked him profusely for the information he’d gotten from Lucius Malfoy. Hell, he was pretty sure that the man had actually been telling the truth when he’d confessed he had no idea what Voldemort was up to.

_I don’t want to start a war with Albus either. At all._

_But there’s nothing for it._

“Yeah, I hear you, Myrtle. Thanks.”

“Things are getting hot here. Too hot. I should leave Britain.” She shook her head in disgust. “If he’s an animagus, make sure to seal the room after me and use the cuffs.”

Harry nodded tiredly, closing his eyes. The soft clicks of her boots were the only signs of Myrtle’s departure.

He opened the door to the room and stared at Wormtail.

_He’s really only my age._

_It’s so much easier when they’re wearing masks._

Sighing, he turned the stunned teenager on his stomach and fastened Myrtle’s mock-up of the DMLE’s magic dampening cuffs around his wrists. They were a far cry from Auror-grade, but they’d hold for a few hours.

Harry didn’t think he’d need even a fraction of that time.

Sitting down in the lone metal folding chair in the room, Harry flicked a spell at Wormtail to sit him upright, then attached his back to the wall with a sticking charm before casting a _Renervate._

The man came to life sputtering. “Wha—where’m I—Harry?” His eyes widened when he spied Harry sitting across from him. “Harry, have we…have we been captured?”

“You have.” Harry watched with no pleasure as it dawned on Pettigrew that his companion might be his captor. “We need to talk, Peter.”

He ignored the boy’s stammers.

“You went to Petunia Dursley’s house with Bellatrix Lestrange, Regulus Black, and Jugson last weekend,” Harry began, voice flat. “There you killed Vernon Dursley. I suspect this was an initiation raid for your entrance into the Death Eaters. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Wormtail’s laugh was nervous, little more than a wheeze. “No, Harry, this is crazy—I didn’t—I wouldn’t—don’t know what you’re saying, I—”

“I was there,” he interrupted. “I was the one who came, the one who killed Black, the one who saw you turn into your animagus form and escape. I’ll ask again. Do you have anything to say?”
The young man’s gaze darted around the room. “You…you don’t understand! This was all…it was part of the plan, see? We needed a spy in the Death Eaters, and I was chosen. It was all part of the act, I swear!” He met Harry’s stare without shame, his own eyes wide and pleading.

_He looks just like he did in the Shack._

Harry sat back and feigned relief. “Oh, thank goodness. I’ll just send a patronus to Dumbledore to confirm.”

“No!”

_Got you._

Pettigrew realised immediately his response had been too quick, too sincere. “No, I mean—we—we didn’t tell Dumbledore. We didn’t think he’d approve of it, but we need a spy. You know that. They’d never believe that James turned and Sirius…well, Sirius didn’t want to have to be with his brother, see?”

Harry stared at the man. “So you’re asking me to believe that James Potter was in on you attacking and murdering his girlfriend’s family? And Sirius?” He shrugged and raised his wand. “Well, seems out of character, but let’s see what they say.”

Wormtail sputtered, writhing in the ropes.

_This pretense is tedious anyway._

“Save it, Peter,” he sighed, standing up and drawing his old knife. “We both know the truth, I’d say. You decided to join the Death Eaters. I would like to know why.”

The young man attempt to scoff, but the sound was brittle. “What, are you going to cut me with that if I don’t answer, Harry?”

“Yes.”

The effect that single word had on the other man was shocking. At once his face fell and raw fear flooded his eyes. The laughter died abruptly.

“Were you there?” Peter finally hissed. “At Gringotts? I can tell you were by your face. You must have felt Him then. The power…the Dark Lord has powers we can’t even dream of, don’t you see? We have no chance, and fighting back…James and Sirius, they have old families and power behind their names. But I don’t have anything, no power! And—and I want to survive this war. I don’t want to die, and I’ll do what I need to see that happen!” Peter spat on the floor. “So don’t you dare judge me. I—I’m the smart one here! The survivor!”

When Harry said nothing, Peter’s tone turned confident and mocking. “Besides, Harry, I’m James’ and Sirius’ best friend. I work for Albus Dumbledore! What makes you think anyone’s going to believe you? I’ve got no Mark yet. I’m a pureblood. They can’t make me take Veritaserum unless I’m accused of killing a magical, not some worthless Muggle nobody.”

Harry’s face stayed blank as Peter slowly began to grin.

“You’ve got no proof! Heh, you can’t even accuse me without putting yourself in a Muggle house using magic to kill a member of one of the most powerful families in Britain! You’ve already got a criminal record. Who’s to say that you won’t see more trouble for this than me?”
Harry closed his eyes.

*Right then.*

“You’re right about all that.” *Poor, stupid Peter.* “I won’t be telling anyone.”

A nervous, unbelieving smile spread across Pettigrew’s face. “Really? Oh…Our, uh, our little secret, then, Harry?”

“Yes, Peter,” he agreed quietly. “Our little secret.”

Then he took three steps forward and slit Wormtail’s throat from ear to ear.

Peter’s smile slowly faded as he bled his life out onto Myrtle’s floor.

*That was…*

The knife felt impossibly heavy.

*That was murder.*

Harry watched the red pool under Peter’s body grow.

*Yes. Yes, it was.*

... 

He nodded to himself.

Five minutes later, he closed the door behind a pristine, empty room and handed the cuffs to Myrtle.

She accepted them silently, and Harry regarded her with a long, level look before planting a kiss full on her lips.

“Thank you.”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” she snapped, and he vacantly half-smiled in understanding. “But…if you’re looking to explore the delights of the fairer sex, I—”

“Nope.”

“Your loss,” she shrugged.

His laugh was just a bit too hollow, a bit too tired. “Really, Myrtle,” his voice deepened, “Thanks.”

“Oh, get out of here. Go get naked with your man or something.”

Harry left and walked through the city, vaguely Enjoying the almost wintery chill of the spring night. He waited until he was a few miles from the warehouse before dropping a transfigured bone that had once been a traitor into a sewer grate.

... 

When he finally returned to the village, Harry curled into Gideon’s warmth and fell into an untroubled sleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

xoxoxox
Two days later, Albus wrote to ask if there had been anyone suspicious in the pub the night Peter disappeared.

“No, Albus, everything was normal. Only regulars in that night, so far as I remember.”

Three days later, a pair of Aurors he didn’t recognize arrived to take his statement on a missing person.

“I wasn’t here when he left—I was off at Pel’s place. But he was gone when I got back sometime after nine or so. Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

They nodded and thanked him. Neither seemed optimistic about solving the case. Missing people were becoming more and more common since the Battle at Gringotts.

Dangerous times, after all.

Chapter End Notes

First, apologies for the sad fate of Regulus Black. I remember reading MunchinMunchkin’s comment months ago (and a few others around that time) about hoping to see Regulus and thinking “Oh damn, what can I say to them? I killed him off when I wrote chapter 29…” So my apologies. For what it’s worth, his death is not only critical to the plot, but also reflects the horrible costs involved even in what Harry and the Nines are doing. Yeah, I firmly believe that those who attack the helpless deserve whatever happens to them in the process, but even in such cases something that has real worth can be lost. I see Voldemort (and, to an extent, the society that produced him) as an evil that can infect others so that they become their worst selves, and the people they could have become otherwise deserve to be mourned.

The title of this chapter is taken from a line in Spenser’s Faerie Queen (6.2)

Regarding Dudley Road Stadium: This was a real football/soccer stadium in the nineteenth century, the home of the Wolverhampton Wanderers. A housing development now stands where it once did. I liked the coincidence of its name and the fact that it was actually the stadium for a team called the Wanderers, so I used it.

On Lucius Malfoy’s wand: I know the serpent-topped wand-in-a-stick/case/cane thingy was only in the movies, not the books. I can’t help it, I loved that prop. I love the story that Jason Isaacs tried to steal it he liked it so much. While I fault the movies for many things, I will always picture that spectacular pimp stick when I think of Lucius Malfoy.

As usual, thank you to my amazing beta AverageFish. Check out their story link on ffnet, Not as Clever as He Thinks (story id:12987401).

Next on The Second String: Things fall apart in Chapter 30, whose title will give away a bit too much.

As always, thank you for reading my story! We’re 2/3 of the way through it now.
The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts

XXX. The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts

10 April, 1979

“Hello.”

Harry’s wand was out before his eyes snapped open. He stared stupidly at the clockwork bird perched on his chest.

“It is currently 7:02 in the morning.”

Chronitus, the Prewetts’ time-telling bird prototype, took off and alighted on a window frame where it proceeded to chirp discordantly. Harry’s adrenaline bled away.

Gideon covered his head with a pillow and swore. “One a’ these days I’m goin’ to strip him for parts.”

“You say that every time he wakes us,” Harry muttered as he regretfully got out of his warm bed, wincing at his sore muscles.

“I don’t think we were supposed to bend like that last night. He reached down for his pants. 

Nope, nope, definitely not.

Throwing on a bathrobe, he grabbed his clothes, quietly padded out into the hall towards the brothers’ shared bathroom—and slammed into someone who went crashing to the ground.

Why...Why is there...a half-naked girl in the hallway?

Still muzzy with sleep, he gaped down at the girl clad in an oversized shirt.

Wait—isn’t that?—“Celeste?” he asked. The Gladrags girl didn’t look her normal self with smeared makeup and very mussed blonde hair.

And I’m used to seeing her slightly more...clothed.

“Bugger,” Celeste moaned as she picked herself up off the ground and vainly tried to pull the hem of the man’s shirt she was wearing farther down her thighs. “This is humiliating. I, uh...well, hello Harry.”

“What in the world is she—oh. “Oh! You’re with Fabian!”

Celeste closed her eyes.
“I’m with Gideon, see, his brother, that’s why I’m here and—”

The blonde winced and nodded shortly. “Yeah, Harry. That’s great. Can you move so I can get into the bathroom please? It’s just that, if I have to do this, I’d much rather do it with robes on.”

He jumped out of the way as though someone had set his feet on fire. “All yours.”

“Cheers,” she grumbled and closed the door.

*Fabian and Celeste the Gladrags girl? Really?*

The man in question lumbered out of his bedroom in nothing but his pants, one hand scratching his stomach, his mustache thoroughly askew. “’Mornin’ mate. You seen a little blonde ‘round anywhere?”

“Shower.”

“Perfect.” Fabian knocked loudly on the door. “Selene, luv—”

“Celeste, her name’s Celeste,” Harry hissed.

“*Celeste,* luv, you want some breakfast?” Fabian corrected himself with a wink to Harry.

*You are such a dog, Fabian Prewett.*

The girl didn’t answer but the redhead gave him a lopsided grin. “Thanks for that, Harry. Knew it was something *heavenly.*”

Harry surrendered with a groan. “I’m going back to bed.”

Gideon slipped a sleepy arm around him as he crawled under the covers once again. “That was quick.”

“Fabian has a *friend* over.”

His boyfriend hummed neutrally, pulling him closer. Two breath-freshening charms later and they were happily, if drowsily, snogging—until a slammed door broke the moment.

“My name is *Celeste,* you pig!”

“Aw, come on luv, don’t be like tha—”

Gideon hit the wall with a Silencing charm. “Where were we?”

Harry grinned. “I believe you were about to—”

“Hello. It is cur—currently 7:13 in the morning,” Chronitus chirped.

“Bloody bird’s a menace,” Gideon muttered. “I think the charms are wearing off. You were saying?”

Harry pulled him down and kissed his neck. “How about we”—

“Hello. It is curren—ren—tly 7:13 in the morning.”

Gideon growled and brandished his wand at the songbird even as Harry dissolved into giggles.

A sudden pounding on the door and more distant thumps down the staircase alerted them that Fabian
had ended their Silencing Charm. “Dammit, Harry, didn’t you say her name was Stella?”

“Celeste, it’s Celeste, Fabian!” He turned to his boyfriend. “Your brother is an arse, Gid.”

“Mm-hmm.”

The elder Prewett was already yelling down the stairs. “Aw, luv, don’t go, don’t be mad! Of course I don’t need Harry to remember—”

“Bugger off!” Celeste called from the ground floor.

The shop’s front door slammed.

“Gid! Harry! Get your arses out of bed! I’m heartbroken and need breakfast!”

Gideon sighed and let his head fall onto Harry’s chest. “We should just give up and go down, shouldn’t we?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hello. It is currently 7:15 in the morning.”

xoxoxox

Harry had the entire day off until the evening shift at the Head, and he seemed to be thoroughly content to spend it puttering around the clock shop’s workroom.

Gideon, on the other hand, was fairly busy, but nonetheless tolerated his boyfriend’s rather lazy presence. He and Fabian had finally managed to sell their idea of a warning clock to the DMLE, and they wanted to get it installed by the wand-check station in the Ministry’s Atrium within the next week. There’d been no luck with getting public funds to set up one in Diagon or central Hogsmeade like they’d hoped, but the brothers had decided to modify their shop’s existing clock tower so that it could at least serve as a warning system for the village.

About an hour before lunch he noticed that Harry had settled in next to him with the Daily Prophet.

His company was hardly the annoyance it would be were it Fabian, or just about anyone else. After all, it felt good having Harry about.

Growing up, Gideon had always been a watchful, perceptive boy. While Molly and Fabe had been running about with unbridled energy, he’d been content to sit quietly and observe others.

Over time he’d developed the unusual ability to feel the magic of those around him. Granted, it wasn’t the most useful talent—he needed some experience with a person and regular proximity before he could get the feel for their magic. Still, there was something deeply satisfying about the way his boyfriend’s bloody jumpy magic would calm in his presence.

It’s like getting a skittish cat to fall asleep in your lap, he thought, as he paused from his casting of charms to run a hand up the younger man’s leg.

Like I’d ever have believed—even for a moment—that you were a squib.

When Harry had claimed to be one, Gideon could have told the pub otherwise. But the younger man had been nice (and rather fit), and Gideon wasn’t one to draw attention to what others wanted ignored. As he usually did with the secrets of others, he’d let it lie.
He let a lot of things lie when it came to Harry.

Gideon shook his head at the thought, willing his mind to stymie the surge of doubts that threatened to escape if he dwelt too long on his boyfriend’s dishonesty.

*Not lies so much as moments without truths…*

Biting his lip, he clamped down on his thoughts.

*That sort of thinking doesn’t lead anywhere you want to go.*

Instead he added a bit of pressure to his hold on Harry’s leg.

*Much more fun.*

The younger man flicked a glance at him from under heavy eyelids, and Gideon withheld a satisfied grin when he felt Harry’s legs open a few inches in welcome. His boyfriend’s magic fell to a low, thrumming murmur.

*Maybe an early lunch break today, then.* He shifted slightly in his chair to relieve the mounting discomfort in his own trousers even as he curled his fingers around Harry’s thigh.

Keeping his eyes fixed on his work, he felt the younger man exhale in a short little burst. He stretched his smallest finger closer to his boyfriend’s groin, and pretended not to notice when Harry closed his eyes, his teeth dragging softly against his bottom lip.

*Oh hell, definitely an early lunch.*

The curtain blocking the way to the front of the shop flew open with the sharp snap of fabric.

“Would you two please go upstairs and have sex, like now?” Fabian barked.

“Wha—sorry?” Harry sputtered.

“Wha—sorry?” Harry sputtered.

His big brother flopped into a chair looking entirely put out. “See, some of us are trying to run a shop, and it’s a bit difficult when the emotion meter out there is fixed on ‘Aroused.’ I was halfway to pulling some lovely little brunette when she noticed it. For some reason, she wasn’t convinced when I tried to tell her it must be my brother and his boyfriend, not me!”

Gideon bit his lip to keep from laughing. There was a hand-shaped print reddening on his brother’s face.

Next to him, Harry snickered. “Lunch then, Gid?”

“God, yes.” *The DMLE can wait an extra hour.*

xoxoxox

Harry lay next to Gideon, eyes closed and chest still heaving.

*That was…* He glanced over at his boyfriend, who was blowing a lock of red hair out of his face. *Gideon is really, really brilliant at that.*

“I love lunch,” he sighed. “Though maybe we should also get something to eat, yeah?”

Gideon laughed breathlessly. “Days like this, I wish we had a house-elf. It’d be nice to just ask him
to bring it to us in bed. No need to put on pants, even.”

A sudden image of Dobby on his old bed on Privet Drive, followed by the sight of a floating pudding flashed into Harry’s mind. He laughed with fond nostalgia. *Damn, I haven’t thought about Dobby in forever…*

“What’s that for, then?” Gideon asked.

“Oh, just remembering this house-elf I used to know when I was younger. It’s actually kind of hilarious, at least now it is. See one time he—”

*What the fuck are you doing?*

“Oh… Never mind.” He schooled his expression into one that felt too bright, too forced. “Though it would be nice to have someone bring us lunch in bed. Maybe next time we have an early lunch I can get Guin to pack a basket for us.”

Gideon smiled, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “There’s an idea…today, though, we could eat here, but there’d be better food at your place. Or maybe a little trip to the Muggle world?”

“Sure, any of that sounds good.” Harry stretched languidly on the bed, working the kinks out of his muscles, before regretfully reaching over the side to find his robes. “Maybe try the Sticks? I know they’re my competition, but I haven’t actually eaten there in years—”

*Bloody — Merlin — fuck!*

Harry had to bite his lip to keep from crying out as his Nines tag suddenly flared with a fierce, angry heat quite unlike its normal alert.

*Shite! What the hell is that about?*

*Oh, hell, the protocol.*

Myrtle had been clear the night she’d handed out the second generation dog tags. “*If they ever burn too hot, check them as soon as possible whether it’s your shift or not. I’ll use that only for emergency communications.*”

“Er, actually, shit, I’ve just remembered that I promised Guin I’d do her a favor before my shift starts. I think I’d probably better go…” He looked away from Gideon and quickly tugged on his trousers.

“Oh.”

The jagged edge in that word chilled the room a few degrees.

“Yes, I’m…” Harry turned to face him. “I’m really sorry.”

The bearded man’s eyes bore into him, but his voice was light. “No problem. See you later, then. I’ve got to get back to the DMLE project anyway.” He pecked Harry quickly on the lips and started getting dressed.

“Yes,” Harry murmured as he fastened his robes. “Later.”

*xoxoxox*

Slamming the stable door behind him, he wrenched the tag out from underneath his robes.
Two words were etched into its face.

**DESTROY THIS**

*Oh shit. What the hell?*

Myrtle wouldn’t send such a message unless she bloody well meant it.

Harry threw the tag onto the stone floor and sent a metal-melting spell from *Tweeny Twig’s* at it, then vanished the remains.

Heavy footsteps thundered down the stairs and Doc burst into the stable. “Thought I heard you down here. You get the message too?”

The younger wizard nodded. “Did you destroy yours and Guin’s already?”

“I’m sure. What do you think’s going on?” Doc asked, rubbing his neck nervously with his remaining arm.

*Is there something wrong with the magic in the tags, maybe? I wouldn’t have thought she’d make them actually burn us that much.*

*Or is Myrtle in trouble?*

Harry glared at the spot on the floor where the tag had been. “Nothing good.”

xoxoxox

The Head was seething with anxiety for the rest of the day.

Harry quietly informed Pel of what had transpired, and asked an otherwise ignorant Dalcop if anything strange had happened at the Ministry that day. Doc kept shooting nervous glances at Guin whenever the door to the pub opened, as though he expected Death Eaters to swarm in and train their wands on his pregnant wife.

Meanwhile, Guin did her best to play the unconcerned Slytherin, but Harry noticed the look of relief that appeared on her face every time Doc moved unconsciously between her and incoming customers.

To their dismay, there was no more communication from Myrtle or any of the Nines. Pel had counseled Harry to wait to be contacted, and he grudgingly followed the old solicitor’s advice rather than Apparate to the warehouse like he so wanted to do.

Late that night, after making excuses to Gideon, he finally fell into an uneasy sleep alone in his bed.

The below-the-fold headlines in the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* put to rest all the nervous theorizing, replacing it with chilling reality.

**British Enchantress Arrested for Breaking the International Statute of Secrecy!**

*Oh shit.*

Harry’s arms felt weak. Guin grabbed the paper from him.

“Okay,” she stammered, “It says, *The DMLE has reported that Muggleborn Myrtle Cramer née Warren of Birmingham, age 50, was arrested yesterday and is being held at the Ministry for multiple*
Doc and Harry interrupted with furious mutters. “Yes, I know, I know.” Guin frowned at them. “Let me finish, there’s more! Okay…Oh dear.” She looked at Harry apologetically. “What? What?”

She sighed and continued reading. “Cramer’s activities were initially brought to light when one of her known associates was arrested by Arthur Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office of the DMLE, for the illegal sale of magical items to Muggles. According to the statement issued, the unidentified associate turned over details regarding Cramer’s alleged criminal enterprise as part of deal struck to drop the charges against them. Cramer will remain in Ministry custody until trial. If convicted on all charges by the Wizengamot, Cramer faces up to thirty years in Azkaban prison.”

“One of her associates?” Doc whispered in shock. “Does this mean it was one of the Nines?”

Harry’s stomach had started to churn the moment Arthur Weasley’s name came up, and now it was positively roiling. “But that’s not possible, is it? We all took secrecy oaths for just this reason!”

Guin stared at the newspaper, as though some coded message would appear if she only looked hard enough.

“I think… I think I see a way someone could have gotten around the oaths,” she said slowly, her forefinger tapping her teeth. “We all swore not to betray our fellow members and not to inform in writing, speech, or by any other method of communication anything regarding their or our actions taken before, during, and after raids or similar threats, right?”

“Yeah, except for the provision about being able to give general details to our attorneys, so long as they had already sworn a confidentiality oath,” Harry confirmed.

“Merlin,” she muttered. “It’s a good oath, but there is at least one loophole that I can see. Myrtle isn’t a member of the Nines. She’s the leader.”

Doc put his head in his hand. “Oaths are finicky things. If it was one of the Nines, that could have given whomever talked the ability to inform on her. Not us,” he sighed. “Just her.”

“Yes, dear, but from the sound of it she isn’t being tried for being a vigilante,” Guin added.

Her husband threw up his hands in frustration.

A very disturbing thought occurred to Harry. “Um, does anyone know if Myrtle actually swore an oath not to talk as well? She was there when a bunch of us swore ours, but she didn’t then. I guess I figured she already had…”

The Dearborns’ widening eyes were answer enough.

Shite.

xoxoxox

Pel dropped in around lunch and pulled Harry into the stable for a tense conversation.
“You’ve been seen with Myrtle by dozens of people, Harry,” he started seriously. “Especially since Ab’s funeral. They will be coming for you, my friend. Play dumb unless it looks like Myrtle’s cracked. Remember, you’re just a pub owner. That’s all. If they arrest you, say nothing but demand your solicitor. They know you’re a wizard, so they won’t keep me from you this time.”

“But what about Myrtle?” Harry bit back. “Can’t you, I don’t know, be her attorney as well? She’s going on trial, she needs one!”

Pel just shrugged. “She hasn’t requested me, maybe she’s got someone else. Maybe she doesn’t want to draw any more eyes to possible connections with the Head. I don’t know.” The older man ran a hand through his scraggly gray hair. “Look, I know as much as you do about all this. For now, lay low and act normal. Pass what I said on to the Dearborns.”

Harry nodded shakily. “Pel, what…what’s going to happen with all the Muggleborn and their families, do you think? They’ve all still got their tags, and we don’t. They don’t know…. One day they’ll be in trouble and call for help. But,” he licked his lips, “we won’t hear them now.”

The older man looked at him gravely. “I think you’ve just answered your own question, lad.”

_Shide._

xoxoxox

**14 April, 1979**

Harry did his best to keep his face blank as he surveyed his pub from behind the bar.

_This is the weirdest Saturday night at the Head ever._

*Even weirder than the one in ’77 when Panty brought in special brownies and everyone spent the night thinking that they were bowtruckles.*

The same dainty woman in exquisite robes whom Harry had seen with Fabian and Gideon some months before sat at one table with another well-dressed girl. Both were trying—and failing spectacularly—to act like they belonged.

*Order members,* he sighed to himself. _Well, Albus did ask if he could post a few on busy nights after the Lucius Malfoy thing. But dammit all, he must have better spies than this!_

Across from them, Sanguini’s group were alternating between leering appreciatively at the wide-eyed Order members and glaring half-heartedly at Loch’s pack across the pub.

Next to Loch, Remus Lupin was pretending he didn’t recognize the Order women. He wasn’t good at it.

The rest of the werewolves were nervously trying to avoid the attention of yet another group. A twosome Harry had already deemed the ‘Obvious Aurors’ were hulking at the table closest to the door. They seemed to think a pair of plain robes over their bright red Auror ones constituted a sufficient disguise. Too bad their brown robes were a few inches shorter than the Auror-issued garb.

Harry hoped that their dress was a deliberate attempt to draw his focus so that he wouldn’t notice the three ‘Less Obvious Aurors’ on the other side of the pub. To their credit, they actually were doing a good job of remaining inconspicuous.

_Though they really should have made sure that the Aurors on their undercover team didn’t guard_
me while I was in the STIFF. Merlin.

All in all, Harry was profoundly disappointed in the stealth demonstrated by both Dumbledore’s Order and the DMLE.

It seemed Pel was having similar thoughts, judging by the twitching of his lips. Harry avoided meeting his eyes, in case that set them both to laughing.

Harry chanced a peek over at one of the small tables in the back. A pair of young men he suspected actually were Death Eater grunts were sitting in quiet conversation. None of the various vigilantes or law enforcement professionals currently infesting his pub were paying them any mind.

He sighed again and poured himself a pint of Steaming Stout.

So the Order’s watching the vampires while they’re supposed to be watching for Death Eaters, Lupin’s trying not to show that he knows the Order, the other werewolves are hoping that the Obvious Aurors aren’t watching them, the Obvious Aurors are watching me so that I won’t spot the Less Obvious Aurors who, of course, are also watching me.

And no one is even noticing the actual bloody Death Eaters.

Just brilliant.

Naturally, all the regulars had immediately cottoned on to the fact that others had invaded their pub. Conversations were strained, jokes were quiet, and many of the more ‘colorful’ clientele simply walked in and then walked right back out again upon catching sight of the Obvious Aurors.

I should send the bastards a bill for all the business I’m losing. And the lot of them are just nursing their drinks!

A loud eruption of laughter from Sanguini’s table cut through the muted volume of the pub. At least the vampires don’t give two shits about what’s going on…and they don’t mind spending the coin for the good stuff.

Gotta love vampires.

The presence of the five Aurors was hardly a surprise. The day after the Prophet article, two Aurors had arrived to ‘invite’ him to the Ministry for questioning. Pel had been right—his association with Myrtle was no secret—and apparently the DMLE believed him to be involved with Myrtle’s business.

That they weren’t wrong was just plain irritating.

As the Aurors had no warrant for his arrest, he had declined, at which point they had settled themselves on stools to question him nonetheless.

For some reason, they were unconvinced by his oft-repeated response that he was “simply a bartender,” and that what his customers were up to wasn’t his business. It probably hadn’t helped that Harry hadn’t been inclined to be polite for very long.

Ab always told me I shouldn’t talk to bureaucrats.

And so now they think that if they just watch the Head long enough, they’ll catch me.

Granted, their questions had hinted that Myrtle’s business was a fair bit more criminal than she’d let
on to him. The Aurors had tried to be vague, but Harry had a sinking suspicion that she was funding the Nines by trafficking her products to groups abroad. He vaguely recalled Peadar Burke being rather unclear about the final destination of those products back when he had sailed to Belgium…

In the end, however, the Aurors apparently couldn’t do more than just watch him, a fact that filled him with a sad sort of warmth.

*Myrtle didn’t talk. I’d be in a cell by now if she had.*

Indeed, no other arrests were mentioned in the subsequent issues of the *Prophet*, and Harry had heard nothing at all from any of the other Nines beyond the Dearborns. He vaguely worried about Clark Prewett, the squib who oversaw Myrtle’s finances, but the man seemed sharp enough to know when to go to ground.

Dalcop had told him that while he’d been servicing the lifts at the Ministry, he’d heard two DMLE officers talking about how “they were going to push for the Muggleborn bitch to get the maximum.” But so far there hadn’t been any follow-up articles in the *Prophet* about the case, nor a trial announcement.

He sighed as a nice enough semi-regular, a petty fence who dealt in stolen potions ingredients and who could go on for hours about Quidditch statistics, walked into the pub, immediately spied the Aurors, and left with a whispering swish of his cloak.

“Barkeep? We’ll have another round—” one of the ‘Less Obvious Aurors’ called out, “—of Gillywaters. With lemon.”

_Goddammit all._

_xoxoxox_

16 April, 1979

*Seriously?*

Harry narrowed his eyes at the cherry-red phone booth. The other times he’d been here, he’d either been dragged through the Aurors’ Apparition station or come via the Floo directly into the DMLE’s waiting room.

*Well, at least the instructions make more sense now.*

With a sigh, he entered the booth, dialed the numbers on the parchment scrap Doc had given him, and stated his business when prompted.

A name placard was ejected from the chute.

*Harry Aberforth, NEWT inquiry.*

That morning there had finally been news regarding Myrtle. Will Armstrong had dropped in early, nervous hands clutching his copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

*Muggleborn Enchantress to be Tried Tomorrow! Prosecutors Pushing for Full Azkaban Sentence!*

Harry had barely been able to calm himself enough to read the article, which wasn’t overly informative. The only thing he, Will, and the Dearborns could guess was that Myrtle’s vigilantism
hadn’t been uncovered, though they figured the seedier side of her business had. Most infuriating, however, was the paper’s silence on exactly what she was being tried for, beyond what had been announced in the first article.

_Trafficking in enchanted Muggle items can’t merit years in Azkaban! It just can’t!_

_Christ, who was she dealing with?_

A hopeless feeling of impotence cast a dark shadow over the pub as the four stared at the newspaper. Part of Harry had wanted to run off and stage a daring prison break for a woman he genuinely respected, regardless of the horrible little voice in his head that kept pointing out that _Myrtle may actually be totally guilty…_

Assaulting the Ministry holding cells was _beyond_ stupid, Harry knew that all too well. Imagining the look on Ab’s face were he to try and pull such a foolhardy stunt put an immediate stop to all his imagined plans.

_But that doesn’t mean I can’t do something._

Harry reviewed his plan—if it even deserved the title—as he walked through the atrium of the Ministry of Magic, barely noticing the splendid ceiling or the general finery of the place. He stopped by a golden fountain whose representations of magical beings gazing with ridiculous admiration at a witch and wizard made him audibly snort.

_Still though…_ He dropped a few coins in the fountain as a donation to St. Mungo’s. _If I can help Myrtle out, I’ll put in the rest of the coins I have,_ Harry found himself thinking desperately.

After a bored, badly-mustached young wizard whose name placard proclaimed him to be ‘Eric’ inspected his wand, he made his way through the golden gates and into a smaller hall surrounded by at least twenty lifts.

_Oh Merlin, not these bloody things again._

Harry shuddered. Dalcop had been spending an _awful_ lot of time in the Head lately. He crossed his fingers and prayed that this wasn’t affecting his maintenance of the lifts.

Ignoring the nervous flutter of his stomach, Harry closed his eyes and held gripped the railing for dear life as the lift jolted and swooped at impossible angles through the shaft. After a few minutes, the rickety death trap deposited him on Level Seven.

_“Department of Magical Games and Sports, Department of Magical Education,”_ an automated woman’s voice announced.

He walked through a rather forbidding stone archway into a long chapel-like hall lit by iron chandeliers far above him. The bare stone walls were broken only by a dozen or so sets of brazen double doors affixed with silver nameplates, while plane trees, somehow planted below the flagstone floor, rose up gracefully on either side like natural pillars. At the very end of the room sat a young woman at an imposing desk.

The austere grandeur of the place was undercut somewhat by the half-dozen owls all jockeying for the woman’s attention, leaving stray feathers and the occasional whiffy dropping around her work station.

_“Merlin, I’d give anything for a phone instead of you lot!”_ she moaned as she vanished another few splatters.
They have Muggleborns working here, then. Good.

She caught sight of Harry and attempted to straighten herself into a semblance of professional nonchalance. “Oh. May I help you?”

He smiled politely. “I hope so. I’ve come to hopefully speak with Madam Marchbanks about taking my NEWTs. I don’t have an appointment, but I’ve met with her before.”

The girl raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “Madam Marchbanks isn’t one for unexpected visit—”

“I know, I’m not surprised to hear that. But if you could just ask her if she would grant a bit of time to Harry Aberforth, I’d really appreciate it.”

It’s your funeral, the girl’s look seemed to say, but she did turn and murmur quietly into what looked like a large, old-fashioned gramophone horn attached to one side of her desk.

After a few moments of whispered conversation, the secretary’s eyes widened.

“She’ll…she’ll see you. At some point, at least. Have a seat,” she gestured vaguely towards a row of severe, straight-backed wooden chairs.

Harry sat—and winced at the deeply uncomfortable position into which the chair forced his body. God, I feel like a primary school student, in trouble with the head teacher again. Knowing Griselda Marchbanks, that was probably their entire purpose.

Twenty minutes later, the secretary again whispered into the horn, and then called out to him. “Madam Marchbanks will see you now,” she pronounced with formality, gesturing to bronze doors at the very end of the hall.

Before he could raise his hand to knock, the most ancient house-elf he could imagine existing opened the door. It was bent over nearly double and had a fair bit of wispy hair growing straight out of his massive ears. The smart purple velour suit it sported must have been popular around the turn of the century—the eighteenth century, that is

“Follow,” he creaked, shuffling into the interior of the…office?

It was certainly unlike any office Harry had ever seen. Its soaring ceiling was barely visible not just because of its sheer height, but also because of the surrounding forest of books.

It’s a literal forest of books, he thought in wonder. Mimicking the plane trees in the hall outside, huge, teetering trees made from stacks of books filled the room, their gravity-defying book-limbs stretching to form a massive canopy. Most of the trees tapered into trunks that grew impossibly more slender closer to the ground, some being formed from the base of a single book.

The path through the center of the forest eventually led to a great old desk carved from a massive tree trunk. There Madam Marchbanks sat writing, the stacks of books and parchments on either side of her so tall they eventually curled into each other to form an arch far above her head.

“Mr. Aberforth to see you, ma’am,” the elf interrupted quietly.

“Ah, thank you, Mr. Bingley,” she responded without looking up. “And would you please begin proofreading Tofty’s questions for the Divination OWL? I’ve put them in the stack in the Divination copse.”

The little elf’s ears drooped, but he hobbled away without complaint.
“Poor Mr. Bingley. Tofty can’t write worth a knut,” Marchbanks said, still not looking up. “Sit.” She flicked her wand, summoning over a leather armchair for him.


“Bookshelves are for philistines,” the old woman sniffed. “How one can expect to track the influence of thoughts on subsequent scholarship from something as childishly linear as a bookshelf, I’ll never understand, but such are the jejune tastes of the last few generations. Now, I admit I’m not one for footnote trees. With the endless cross-pollination of ideas, I could never hope to sort with such finicky things. Topical and methodological trees are the way to go, I’ve always said.”

Harry was lost for words. “Oh,” he responded thoughtfully, hoping he didn’t seem completely dense.

From her low sigh, he suspected he had been unsuccessful.

“But, Mr. Aberforth, you’re hardly here to discuss bibliographical horticulture. You’re here, so you say, to discuss taking your NEWTs.” She finally looked up, her flat expression conveying precisely how believable she found that excuse.

Looking around, he cleared his throat awkwardly. “Yes, well…it’s a, er, rather sensitive matter, ma’am…”

“Ah. Inspector Bucket!” she cried, making him jump. A portrait of a husky, middle-aged man in Victorian dress hastened into the only painting Harry could see in the room. “Bucket, are we secure?”

Bristling, the man nodded. “All clear, ma’am. I shall keep my vigilance in the foyer, by your leave.” At a wave of her hand he departed from the frame.

“Talk, Mr. Aberforth. I assume your real concern is your compatriot Ms. Myrtle Cramer.”

Harry was no silver-tongued politician, he knew that, and Griselda Marchbanks seemed the sort to appreciate frank speech. But as he opened his mouth, the words he wanted to say lodged stubbornly in his throat.

Fuck. The oath won’t let me talk about details, even if she knows about the Nines.

An ancient eyebrow quirked. “Take your time,” she advised with a hint of sarcasm. “Secrecy oaths can be a bother to work around, though at least you lot tried to do the thing right.”

Thinking rapidly, he eventually found something that the oath deemed permissible. “Yes. She’s saved a lot of people and I don’t want her to go to jail.”

Marchbanks snorted. “Well then, she shouldn’t have broken any laws. Especially those particular laws, and certainly not so audaciously.” Harry made to protest, but a single look from the matron quelled him. “Do you even know the details of the crimes for which she is currently being charged?”

“Well—”

She sat back in her chair with a deep, disapproving frown. “I didn’t think so. Yet you dare to come here, in public and under transparent pretenses, to beg for leniency?”

Shite. She’s even better at giving the angry-old-lady-look than McGonagall.
“Well…yes.” He licked his lips nervously. “Yes I do, ma’am.”

Her cackle cut through the forest of her office. “Ah, at least you’ve got a set on you, Mr. Aberforth.” She narrowed her eyes. “Given your trade, I don’t suppose you’ve brought any refreshments, have you?”

Harry smiled nervously and reached into his pocket for the shrunken bottle of the whiskey the old woman had enjoyed the last time and another of honey. “Two fingers and honey, right?” he asked as he resized the bottles and a pair of tumblers he’d brought along as well.

“Oh, well done there, young man. If you’ve got to grovel, do it with good liquor on hand.”

The drank silently for a moment.

“So,” he hesitated, “you aren’t going to help Myrtle, are you?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, boy,” Marchbanks snapped. “We have the evidence that she was selling enchanted objects, including weapons, to an intermediary, who then funneled them to various Muggle governments on the continent. In particular, cases of bullets enchanted to invariably strike their target were purchased in bulk by the Soviet Union.”

His stomach sank. Oh fucking hell. Myrtle had sold the bullets he’d inspired to the blasted Soviet Union in the middle of the bloody Cold War.

“Most of her goods aren’t really a threat to us, of course, and I doubt the Muggle soldiers using the bullets would have even realised anything was afoot. Nonetheless, such items could seriously affect any armed conflict between Muggle governments. Cramer’s violations of international law are thus blatant and considerable. If we don’t go after her, the ICW surely will, and would likely come down even harder on her. A fine kettle of fish, this one is.”

Harry wanted to interrupt, ask questions, beg. But he’d worked in a pub long enough to know when a customer wanted to talk and, more importantly, wanted him to listen.

Marchbanks took another long draw of her whiskey. “There’s only so much I can do. With that Dark Lord laying low since the battle on Gringotts square, the Ministry has become more paranoid by the day. While we know he has spies seeded throughout our halls, we have no idea who they actually are. I can’t push for much given my precarious position, and your Mrs. Cramer, to be frank, deserves to be punished. She’s done good things, but those don’t erase her truly dangerous actions, no matter how much you may want them to.”

“No! Dammit, ma’am, she doesn’t deserve Azkaban—”

“Hush yourself and don’t destroy my good opinion of you!” Marchbanks snapped, glaring him into a sullen silence. “You’re a loyal one, Mr. Aberforth, and I respect that. But Cramer is a grown woman, not some innocent ingenue manipulated into her crimes by the cold, hard world.” The old woman sighed. “Nonetheless, I intend to try to convince some colleagues on the Wizengamot to give her a somewhat reduced sentence, but that’s impeded by the fact that she hasn’t mentioned your group or its work against Death Eaters at all. She’s not betrayed you, and while that’s laudable, it makes her actions seem all the more mercenary.”

Oh Myrtle. Dammit. Dammit all.

She paused, sipping her whiskey and surveying him with old eyes grown suddenly kind. “Cramer is taking the fall for you and yours, Mr. Aberforth.”
“So what can I do—”

“Let her.”

A leaden weight settled in his stomach.

*I took a secrecy oath. I couldn’t testify even if I wanted to. Oh, Myrtle.*

“You can’t think of *anything* I can do?” he asked desperately. “Please?”

“No, Harry.” Her voice was soft, all hard edges and steel worn away. “I am sorry.”

“It’s…it’s not fair.”

She snorted once again and raised her glass to him in a silent toast.

A sudden thought struck him and he could feel his temper rise.

“Will they be next on the list of the missing?” She could have been asking him about the weather, for all the nonchalance in her tone.

Harry closed his eyes. *I probably wouldn’t kill them. Especially if they had a good reason or were tricked. If they’re like Pettigrew though…*

“No.” It was only a potential lie, he assured himself. “Not because of me, at least.”

Those eyes studied him again for a long moment. “Pierce Brocklehurst. I believe he worked as a healer for your group?”

Harry’s eyes widened in shock.

“The MoMA agent who caught him, Weasley, found him selling potions to Muggles that were disguised as pharmaceuticals. Apparently the man has an infant daughter and has been hurting for coin quite desperately. When he was threatened with Azkaban, he began informing on Cramer’s business deals, as he’d been aware of her affairs for some years. You all obviously took vows or oaths which prevented him from talking about the vigilante side of her activities, a decision which has kept the rest of you out of cells.”

Harry took a gulp of his own whiskey. *Fucking traitor!* The old, familiar rage began to boil, but the rational part of his mind ruthlessly reminded him that he couldn’t just *kill* a desperate person he knew to have a baby at home.

*I’m not a murderer.*

*But Pettigrew*…a voice whispered in his mind.

*Pettigrew was different,* he snarled back at himself. *I’m not that sort of murderer.*

Marchbanks was still staring at him. “Of course, it’s lucky that he couldn’t discuss the Nines. Otherwise Cramer would have been dosed to the gills with Veritaserum, and you’d all be facing the Wizengamot for the murders of dozens of witches and wizards, I suspect.”

*How the hell does she know about that? We didn’t leave bodies and*—
“Oh, don’t be dense, Aberforth.” The woman seemed able to read his mind. “It’s obvious, and one of the worst-kept secrets in the Ministry. At least a few individuals from the last dozen or so graduating classes of Hogwarts have disappeared like farts in the wind, among them the heirs to several houses. Granted, most were relative nobodies, but the numbers don’t lie, especially when one adds in missing alumni from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons who were known to be in wizarding Britain. Someone has been eliminating those most predisposed to follow this Dark Lord. And quite effectively, I would add.”

He quickly refilled his glass.

“I suspect your group has done more to stall this war than the Aurors, Hit Wizards, and Order of the Phoenix combined, Mr. Aberforth, not to mention saving the lives of quite a few innocents. Of course, no one in power will ever thank you. Such is the lot of the vigilante, I suppose.”

“I—” He closed his eyes. “I really can’t do anything for Myrtle, can I?” The fact that the old woman knew about the Order hardly surprised him at this point, and was something he just didn’t have the energy to worry about.

Marchbanks placed her liver-spotted hand briefly over his. “No.”

He wanted to yell at her, to rage about the unfairness of it all. But instead he suddenly felt very tired, and very, very young.

“What—what should we do now, do you think?”

She sighed and moved her hand to draw an old-fashioned cigarette from a silver case on her desk. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. At my age, everything can kill me. I might as well enjoy myself.” With another sigh, she nestled herself back into her chair and idly lit the cigarette. “End the group. You’ve done what you can. The Muggleborn know the score now, and those adults with school-age children will likely be leaving in droves at the end of the Hogwarts term. Those who stay…well, you can’t save everyone, especially from their own choices.”

Harry hands balled into fists. “But, but the war! I can’t just deal myself out of this war before we win —”

Her cackling laugh turned into a cough. “I don’t know where you got the idea that your Platform Nine could ever win a war, child! You did a valuable thing, certainly, but this mess can’t be well and truly ended by vigilantes bent on eliminating the grunts. The rot has infected us far more seriously than that. It’s the Dark Lord and those of his supporters who hold true power in our world that must be neutralized, and your group would never have the strength for that on their own.”

He breathed in a breath as harsh as the truth she was telling him. She’s right. Dammit, she’s right.

“And now the time has come for me to say farewell to you, Mr. Aberforth. Let Ms. Cramer go. Be thankful you’ll face no repercussions, or so I hope. Disband your group.” She held her hand to shake his. “Our business together, it seems, is concluded, unless you actually wish to discuss your NEWTs?”

Shaking her hand, he absently demurred and mumbled some niceties before standing to make his way back through the book forest.

“Mr. Aberforth?”
“Ma’am?”

“Do leave the bottle, if you please.”

He snorted softly. “Yes ma’am.”

xoxoxox

Later that night Harry showered and prepared himself for a dinner date with Gideon. He’d barely seen the man since the whole thing with Myrtle started. The Prewett brothers had spent much of the week finally installing and fine-tuning the Ministry aggression clock, and then they’d gone to spend the weekend with their nephews so that Molly and Arthur could enjoy a night or two to themselves.

Harry stared at his reflection in the mirror. _God, I really don’t look ready for a date._ A face pinched with worry gazed back at him. Though he looked exhausted from nights of uneasy sleep, his limbs shuffled and twitched with nervous energy that screamed for him to get off his arse and do something.

When he’d gotten home he’d immediately sent innocuously-worded warning letters to both Caffrey and Peadar Burke, concerned that the Ministry would trace the transport of the bullets to one or both of them. For a few minutes it had felt like he’d actually achieved something, but that passed all too soon.

Shaking off his worry for Myrtle and his shame for not being able to think of a way to help her wasn’t going to happen, he concluded. Even now, diverting his mind by envisioning his upcoming night with Gideon only ended in seeing an insane Myrtle looking much like Sirius had in his prison photo.

_I’ll feel better once Gideon gets here. There’s nothing I can do, at least right now. Pel, Doc, and Guin agreed._

_We’re just stuck._

_For now, at least._

A knock on his bedroom door forced him to put those thoughts aside for the time being as Gideon ducked into the room.

“Hey! You’re a little early, can you just give me a few—”

“Sit down, Harry. Please.” Gideon’s voice was calm and…and wrong.

He turned to see the redhead clad in his regular work clothes and staring at him with an odd expression.

Harry sat without a word, his breath catching in his throat.

Gideon closed the door.

“I haven’t asked for a lot, I think,” Gideon continued in that same even tone. “I’ve wanted to. Really. But I haven’t. Because I like you. Because I like my life with you better than I do without you.”

“Gid, what—”

Gray eyes flashed. “I’m speaking my piece now, Harry.”
Harry closed his mouth.

“I haven’t asked for a lot,” he repeated, “and I’ve always known you were a liar.”

His heart began to thrum.

“I knew you weren’t a squib long before you said anything, but I figured you must have your reasons, so I never mentioned it. I know you’re into things I don’t know about, things that have you coming home in the middle of the night injured and depressed and covered in blood. But I’ve trusted you, because I believe you’re a good person, and don’t think I haven’t noticed that you haven’t asked me to betray what I do for the Order.”

The man’s eyes stared into him, and his voice never wavered.

*Christ. He’s…he’s furious.*

“I told myself that it was okay that you just don’t make sense. That it was okay that you know enough about Muggles to be a Muggleborn yourself, but apparently have positive childhood memories of a house-elf. That you never went to Hogwarts but played Seeker on a team *somewhere*. That you hid in a fucking forest for some reason, that you lied to the entire wizarding world and claimed to be a squib. These and a hundred other things. I really tried not to care.”

*I’m not nearly as good at deflecting suspicion as I thought I was.*

“So I thought, ‘yes I could love a liar.’ I really thought I could. But,” Gideon ran a hand through his hair, the horribly even tone of his voice finally cracking. “But you’ve made *me* into a fucking liar now too.”

“What? I haven’t—”

Gideon’s face, slowly turning into an angry red, brought him up short.

“I expect you know that Arthur was the one who had your friend Myrtle arrested.”

*Shite.*

“When I saw him earlier, he mentioned that his team had discovered a huge network of Muggleborn families connected to some sort of enchanted grid at her hideout. He’s been interviewing those they could track down for the past few days.”

*Oh. Oh, shite.*

“Apparently, witches and wizards visited them last fall and convinced them to take a communications device that would alert them if they needed help. Their descriptions don’t match any known British magicals, so Arthur and the others presume they wore glamours. The Muggle families were told that members of the group would have similar devices.

“They’re necklaces with silver tags on them, at least the ones the Muggle families had. Arthur asked me if I’d ever seen any witch or wizard wearing something like that.”

Harry closed his eyes.

“I could have told him that the person I sleep next to most nights wears just that sort of necklace. That every so often he grabs it for whatever reason, and then leaves on some ridiculously transparent excuse. I could have told my *sister’s husband* that. But I didn’t. I lied instead.”
“Gideon, I—” Harry mouthed unformed words helplessly, lost as to what he could say.

“I lied to my family, Harry, about something bloody serious. For you.” He broke off and shook his head, shoulders sagging.

A silence stretched out in the room, until Gideon finally squared his shoulders again and looked at Harry, his face strangely set.

“I can’t keep doing this, Harry. It’s not just that I don’t want to have to lie for you…I don’t want you to lie to me. I’m not good at—at saying things. At connecting with people or sharing myself or whatever. I never have been. But I’ve done my best to try to do that with you. To treat you as more than just someone it’s—it’s convenient to hang out with, and fuck, and sleep next to. I deserve the same in return.”

Alice’s words from their argument before he left on The Delight suddenly began to haunt him. *Lying all the time, pretending to be something you’re not…that’s going to catch up with you, Harry. You just can’t go through your life expecting so much more from people than you’re willing to give them.*

“So…” Gideon nodded as if steeling himself and then finally spoke again in clipped tones. “So. What’s your real name? Your whole name. Don’t give me any of that ‘Harry Aberforth’ shit. Where are you from? And why did you pretend to be a squib?”

*I can’t.*

*He can’t understand that I just can’t.*

The words felt like claws in his throat when they finally came. “I can’t, Gideon. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. But I just can’t.”

“Are you prevented by a magical oath?”

Harry swallowed hard, hating the matter-of-fact sound of his boyfriend’s voice. *Why can’t he just yell at me? I could scream back if he would just yell at me.* “For the tags, yes. For everything else… no. No, I just can’t.”

Gideon didn’t yell.

“I deserve better.”

He closed his eyes again, his body so rigid with tension that his muscles were beginning to ache. “I know.”

The other man regarded him steadily for a long, horrible moment. “I guess this is done then.”

Harry’s breath rattled in his chest.

Seconds passed in empty silence.

Gideon left.

Chapter End Notes
Huge thanks to my beta AverageFish, author of *Not as Clever as He Thinks* (check it out at https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12987401/).

Next on *The Second String*: I try my best to make a miserable, post-breakup, post-Myrtle, post-Nines Harry as entertaining as I can in Chapter 31, “Wallowing with Werewolves (and a Wanker, and a Weasley).” It’s the calm before the storm that is Chapter 32.
Wallowing with Werewolves (and a Wanker, and a Weasley)

Chapter Notes

6/9/19: Minor grammar and phrasing edits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XXXI. Wallowing with a Werewolf (and a Wanker, and a Weasley)

22 April, 1979

Ain’t no spell that I can cast,
Ain’t no ‘chantment that can last,
Cain’t I ‘bliviate the past,
S’os I don’ have to think ‘bout you-ooooo?

Doc closed his eyes as the American started howling the chorus yet again.

“Can’tcha hit the ceiling with a silencin’ charm for us, Doc?” Nappy asked. “This just ain’t right.”

Pel shook his head. “We’ve been trying for more than an hour. Went through every ruddy spell any of us could think of—”

“I even tried an Impervious on the ceiling, just in case it could do the trick,” Dalcop added.

“But we’re thinking that Ab must have charmed the records themselves—or maybe the player—to break through all of that. Nothing seems to work, or even the dampen the noise.”

“Ab was bastard enough do somethin’ like that, ‘specially when he was young enough to listen to such rubbish,” Nappy admitted.

Ain’t no potion I can brew,
Ain’t no plant that I can chew...

“What does that even mean?” Martial Sorner muttered to himself.

“Indeed, he was a great man, Aberforth was, but his youthful predilection for Grimy Grimditch’s music was one of his greatest flaws.” Pel shook his head. “Too bad the lad found them.”

Doc rubbed his temples.

S’os I don’ have to think ‘bout you-ooooo?

“Oh, this just ain’t right,” Nappy moaned again.

Dalcop put his head in his hands. “Dinner with Vera hurts less.”

The door down to the kitchen slammed open. All the barflies jumped when a grim-faced Guin marched towards the stairs to the second floor.

“This. Has. To. Stop.”
“Guin, love, he’s had a rough couple of days—”

“No, Doc. I can’t take it anymore!”

The men watched silently as she ascended the stairs, shoulders squared and eyes flashing.

Dalcorp gave a low whistle.

“Well, that’s that sorted then,” Doc murmured.

A furious pounding sounded over the crooning American. “Harry Aberforth, you open this door right now or we’ll be scraping you off the walls!”

“Think so?” Pel asked.

A small explosion rattled the Head’s windows.

“That’d be the door,” Doc said. “And yeah, she’ll handle it.”

As if on cue, the music cut off and the barflies sighed blissfully into the silence.

“I don’t get it, though,” Nappy said. “Boy’s been down since ol’ Gid broke ‘em off, sure, but he wasn’t this bad all week!”

Doc shrugged, but Pel didn’t miss the dark look on the barman’s face.

The old solicitor took a long pull of his drink. He knew Harry was broken up that his relationship with the Prewett boy had ended as it had. Indeed, though he felt for his friend, he approved of Harry’s decision not to answer the clock maker’s demands. All it takes is one person with loose lips an’ they’d have him locked away forever.

But he and Doc both knew that the row with his boyfriend was far from the only thing getting the lad down.

Myrtle Cramer’s trial had been held the day after their breakup and, by all accounts, she’d gotten off lightly given the charges against her. As if anyone with a brain could call eight years in Azkaban light. The old solicitor snorted to himself and tipped a silent toast to enchantress.

Nonetheless, it was the headlines from the Saturday morning Prophet the day before, combined with Prewett and Cramer, that had really sent the lad into the sort of emotional spiral that inspired all young people to pollute the world with wretched music.

Dark Marks Rise Over Britain! Five Families of Hogwarts Students Found Tortured and Murdered in Muggleborn Massacres!

Once again, Voldemort’s camp had sent out groups for synchronized initiation raids against Muggleborns’ families. Yet this time, Pel knew, the anonymous defenders that had been fighting them since August hadn’t show up at a single home, the Nines having scattered to the winds.

Some of those families probably died pressing those damn tags, terrified an’ waiting for help that never came.

Pel shook his head and took another long pull of his Steaming Stout.

The synchronization of the murders made it easy enough for the Muggles in various cities to note the similarities in the crime scenes, and they were theorizing that groups ranging from the Irish
Republican Army to a rising religious cult were responsible. Their newspapers were filled with reports on the massacres, to the point that it was impossible for the wizarding world to ignore them.

Well, we sure as shit aren’t ignoring it now. Everywhere—Hogsmeade, Diagon, the Ministry—one could see small groups of folks talking in hushed voices, their eyes wary. Pel wasn’t naive enough to believe that most really cared about the dead families of Muggleborn kids. However, the sudden—in their minds, at least—attacks had pulled them out of the complacency they’d been sliding into once again as the fervor from the Battle at Gringotts gradually abated.

Everyone’s getting scared again. They want to forget there’s a war, but the world won’t let them.

An’ Harry…. His young friend was almost certainly blaming himself for not being able to save those people. Little wonder the lad’s miserable. In the space of just a few weeks he’d lost both his first relationship and his means for making a meaningful contribution to the war effort, while being unable to save a person he admired from being sent to Hell on Earth.

Pel looked up as Guin descended the stairs with exaggerated dignity.

“He understands our objections to his choice in music and volume now, love.”

Doc raised an eyebrow. “Where are you off to then?”

“I’m thinking I’ll whip him up some treacle tart for later,” she mused absently as she headed to the kitchen.

Her husband grinned at the barflies. “That’s my girl’s definition of kindness, that is. Kick a man down, then offer him dessert.”

“Better n’ most people’s, I s’pose,” Nappy pronounced sagely to the murmured agreement of the group.

xoxoxox

30 April, 1979

It was early on a Monday afternoon and the pub was completely deserted, with Doc and Guin having gone out for some time together. Harry, after careful consideration, opted to spend his time sitting at the bar, nursing a beer and evaluating the current conditions of his life.


He couldn’t argue the point. In the last two weeks, Harry felt he’d become a rather expert brooder. Messed up everything with Gideon, couldn’t help Myrtle, and all those people died. Yeah, Ab, I’m definitely brooding.

And feelin’ sorry for yourself, his imagined Ab added. Never an attractive thing to do.

Harry snorted. “Yeah, well, I’ll just have to live with you finding me unattractive.”

“Er—I can come back later…” A very real, very puzzled, very not-Ab voice replied.

He whirled around to find Remus Lupin looking back at him.

“Oh, hell, Lupin! Yeah, sorry, just talking to myself.” Harry rubbed his reddening face with his hand. “What’re you having?”
Lupin failed to properly smother his amusement as he took a seat at his usual table. “Oh,” he said, palming the small coin bag in his hand, “just an FGA, I suppose.”

Harry frowned. Paolopabita’s Fishy Green Ale was by far the cheapest drink the Head served and, in his opinion, hardly fit for human consumption. The occasional hag enjoyed it well enough though, so he kept it in stock.

*Professor Lupin always had tatty robes, didn’t he?* Harry mused. *Crap, he probably can’t afford better.* He racked his brain for what the man drank when someone else was buying.

“How about a glass of Beetle Berry, or a pint of Steaming?” he offered instead. “On the house, of course, to make up for my, er...comment.”

The young man looked reluctant, but finally gave a small smile. “A Steaming, then. Thanks.”

While Lupin pulled out a book and nursed his drink, Harry returned to his bar stool. With a sigh he decided that spinning a few stray knuts in circles would be an obvious improvement over aimless brooding.

*See, Ab? Now I’m doing something.*

He gradually added a few more coins into the mix and set to choreographing them in a complicated dance using a softened version of his wandless summoning and banishing charms.

There was no sound in the pub for the next half hour apart from the regular *ching ching ching* of spinning coins hitting each other. Eventually, Harry remembered he was supposed to be working and glanced over at Lupin.

Who, he discovered, had closed his book and was looking at him in mild annoyance. Harry glanced at his spinning, *chinging* coins. “Oh, sorry. These are irritating you, aren’t they?”

Lupin huffed, and made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Forget it. You seem bothered by something.” The man paused. “Want to talk about it?”

*Shit, that’s my line. Bad, bad bartender!*

“No, it’s...I don’t...y’know.”

*Oh, well said me.*

Wait...*Lupin kind of does know about how this feels, doesn’t he?* A thrill of shock ran through him. *Of course, he knows exactly what this is like!*

“Okay, actually, yeah.” The other man looked as surprised as Harry felt that he was taking Lupin up on his offer.

“Did you tell Potter and Black about being a werewolf, or did they just find out on their own?” he asked without preamble.

Lupin stared at him, eyes wide. “Uh—*what? Oh God, did you get bitten? Are you—*”

“Huh? Oh!” Harry shook his head vehemently. “Oh, no, nothing like that. But, er—” he floundered. The other man frowned.

“It’s not about being a werewolf, see. It’s about...” Harry licked his lips. “It’s about secrets, I guess.
Dangerous ones. And trusting people with them. Look, sorry, I know this is personal, I probably shouldn’t have asked.”

Remus sat back with a thoughtful look. “Oh…I think I understand…. Well, no, I didn’t tell them. I was too scared to do that. In fact,” he gulped down his beer. “In fact, I was pretty much terrified all the time that someone would find out. Dumbledore took a big risk—politically and in terms of his position at the school—in letting me attend. If anyone had discovered what I was and had thrown a strop, I’m sure I’d have been expelled.”

Harry nodded, drinking in every word as he moved to refill the man’s stout. “Yeah. Yeah, I get that.”

“But my friends figured it out after just a few years.” The other man closed his eyes for a moment before smiling helplessly at Harry. “And honestly, Harry, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Do you…do you think you would have eventually told them, if they hadn’t found out on their own?”

“Never.”

What?

“Seriously? Never?” he sputtered. It dawned on him that he’d been expecting quite a different response.

Lupin shook his head slowly. “No, I never would have. I would have lied to them with my last breath out of terror of losing the bit of happiness I’d found. And it would’ve been my loss.”

He tipped his new beer towards Harry before taking a long pull. “You have to understand, it was exhausting lying all the time, trying to be something else around them. It took me a long time to realize that I was worth more than that, long after they called me on what I was. People deserve friends who know them, I guess.”

At this Harry recalled a conversation he’d had with Guin not long after he and Gideon had broken up. The woman had been rankled he’d been playing Ab’s old (and admittedly godawful) records, and she’d had surprisingly little sympathy for him.

“Well honestly, Harry, what d0 you expect? You can only play the ‘oh-so-mysterious man’ for so long. I certainly wouldn’t have put up with not knowing about Doc’s past, let alone not knowing his real name! You can’t have a real relationship with actually getting to know about a person. I love you, but I’d have binned your sorry arse too.”

Remus’ bitter laugh brought him back to reality. “Thinking about it now, Harry, I tend to believe everyone is a coward about something, and I was too scared to change the status quo without them pushing me into it.”

He fidgeted awkwardly at that. “But surely a person doesn’t have to tell their friend everything, yeah? I mean, we’re all allowed secrets.”

Lupin hummed. “Of course. But me being a werewolf is fundamental to who I am. It’s the sort of thing that affects me so much that I’m not the same person to my friends if they don’t know that.”

The man looked at him shrewdly. “Can I ask what this is all about?”

“Nothing…well, nothing I, er, want to get into. But thanks.” Harry bit his lip. Some disturbing, awkward feeling squirmed in his stomach. He really didn’t like thinking that he was being a coward
about all this. *I promised Ab and Pel, after all. I’m just being true to my word and it would be
dangerous for anyone to know.* “And I’m glad you found such great friends.”

Remus’ smile looked hollow and wan. “Yeah. Yeah, thanks.” He drank deeply again.

*He really…he really looks like hell, come to think of it.* Dark circles under the man’s eyes stood out
starkly against the pallor of his face. *Merlin, he didn’t even look this bad when he was older.* “There
anything you want to talk about? No offense, but you don’t look so good, Lupin.”

“Oh, it’s—I was just out quite late again.” Remus stared at his pint glass. “Funny we’re sitting here
talking about my friends. Sirius and I, we…we went looking for Peter again.”

A chill gripped Harry.

“You know him, right? Came in sometimes with me? I think the Aurors talked with you after he
went missing last month.”

*Oh hell.* His tongue managed to form words, but they sounded like another person was speaking
them. “Yeah, yeah I remember him. They—er—they still haven’t found him?”

Remus’ eyes turned glassy. “No. Nothing. He just *disappeared.* Dumbledore…he thinks that Death
Eaters killed him. So does Peter’s mum. At this point,” he sighed deeply, “at this point so do I, but
James and Sirius have gone a bit mental. James is trying to be so optimistic he’s downright
delusional, and Sirius is sure that Peter is being tortured somewhere, so we have to find and rescue
him. Now, whenever we can, we go out and look.” The werewolf broke off and suddenly seemed to
find a button on his jacket fascinating. “Hon—honestly, Harry, I’m only doing it for the two of them
these days. I don’t—I don’t expect to find him anymore.”

Harry sat very still, trying not to notice Lupin wiping at his eyes.

*I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!*

*I’m not sorry I killed him, because he’s a fucking traitor and would ruin everyone’s life, but I’m
sorry I didn’t think of you. I’m sorry that you and James and Sirius are hurting and you’ll never
know what happened.*

*Pettigrew didn’t deserve better, but you all do.*

He opened his mouth, wanting to say all these things. Ultimately, however, all that came out was a
sincere, “I’m really sorry, Remus,” that he knew damn well didn’t erase the hurt he’d done the man.

*I’m a right bastard.*

*But there’s nothing for it now. Damn it all.*

Lupin nodded slowly and the conversation fizzled into silence.

xoxoxox

19 May, 1979

A few weeks later found Harry glaring down at the headline of yesterday’s discarded *Daily Prophet.*

*AURORS THWART YOU-KNOW-WHO’S FORCES AGAIN!*

*A dozen Death Eaters caught in failed attack on famous Muggle gallery*
None of this makes any bloody sense, he groused. There was no need to reread the article. He’d been through it—and the others like it that had been appearing in the paper for the past week—more times than he wanted to count.

Things weren’t going so well for Voldemort. Sure, the man’s ranks had apparently swelled with new recruits once no one appeared to stop his spring raids. But then he had turned from the easy targets of Muggleborn houses and set his sights on major Muggle areas, all for no reason that Harry could fathom. Now that the Ministry was taking attacks in the Muggle world more seriously—can’t have anyone breaking the Statute of Secrecy—the newly-minted Death Eaters were meeting far fiercer opposition than they likely expected.

Yeah, because killing a few defenseless Muggles means that you’re ready to fight Aurors, obviously.

Major landmarks in London, Glasgow, Manchester, and a few other areas had all been the scenes of Death Eater activity, but, like the most recent attack on the Scottish National Gallery, civilian and Auror deaths were almost non-existent. Meanwhile, nearly all those fighting for Voldemort had been captured and were languishing in the Ministry holding cells.

The sheer number of prisoners, combined with the fact that May and June were the Wizengamot’s recess months, meant that it would be at least June before any saw their lawyers and July before any saw the inside of a courtroom.

Harry was meticulously keeping track of every Death Eater caught, but as yet the ones he recognized were Avery and Rowle, whose names he’d heard in the graveyard of his own world.

Indeed, the of identities of arrested Death Eaters were…odd.

Pel had remarked that Voldemort’s forces seemed split between a handful of known British purebloods and criminals, some foreigners from the continent, and, most strangely, the sorts of everyday nobodies that would normally never be suspected of being involved with the Death Eaters.

“Ernie Prang was arrested during the midnight attack on Big Ben?” Pel gasped. “Why in the world would Voldemort even want him of all people?”

Harry, who remembered the older version of the Knight Bus Driver from his own world, could only shake his head in confusion.

Despite the inexplicability of many of the arrested Death Eaters, Harry was pleased—he was, really—that the tide seemed to be turning against Voldemort.

But...

The word kept digging into his thoughts.

But...he wanted to be involved.

With the scattering of the Nines and the incarceration of Myrtle, Harry was left as nothing more than a civilian bystander who occasionally passed information to Dumbledore.

Every new article made him feel simultaneously thrilled that things seemed to be going poorly for Voldemort and rankled that he wasn’t playing any part in it.

Maybe Snape was right about me. Maybe I am arrogant.

Fine.
I don’t need to be the hero, but I can’t keep being a useless spectator while other people risk their lives. I just can’t.

His frustration was compounded by the fact that he didn’t know what else he could do to keep his world’s future from happening. Pettigrew was dead. The basilisk was dead. A younger Barty Crouch was still alive and currently in his sixth year, but Harry couldn’t bring himself to kill a so-far innocent kid, and he had no idea who else had helped torture Alice and Frank.

I hate being useless.

“I say, my dear fellow, is this establishment open or not?”

He looked up to see a Hogwarts student—maybe a fifth or sixth year?—striking what the boy clearly assumed was a dashing pose in the vestibule of the public room. A trio of girls giggled around him. One was actually petting his lilac outer robe.

“Sure, kid. What’re you having?”

The blond boy swept dramatically toward the bar and slammed a Galleon down. “The ladies and I would like four pints of Campbell’s very finest Old Whiskey.”

The girls tittered.

Harry stared at the boy.

He wants pints of whiskey? Four of them for only one Galleon?

Christ, what an idiot.

“How about some nice Butterbeers instead?” he sighed.

The boy faltered momentarily, but then flipped his hair back and graced Harry with what he clearly believed was a charming smile. “Ah, but Butterbeers are for plebeians and the prepubescent, good barkeep! Surely you agree?”

His white teeth glinted in the low candlelight of the Head.

Harry froze.

No.

Nope.

There’s no way I’m dealing with a teenaged Gilderoy-sodding-Lockhart.

Nope.

Harry fixed his face in a stony mask.

Little Lockhart quailed under the force of his glare. “Well, you make a convincing argument, my good fellow. Four Butterbeers it is! Ladies, find yourselves the ah, best seats in the house!”

Harry managed not to roll his eyes until his back was turned as he got the kids’ drinks. After a moment’s pause, he cast a few spells Guin had taught him, charms which would render ineffective any other spell or potion added to the bottle—including any love or memory potions.
He couldn’t protect the girls currently making cow eyes at Lockhart from their own bad choices, but he could at least protect them from the sort of person he knew the blond would grow up to become.

Drinks protected and delivered, he tuned out Lockhart as the boy called to order what he claimed was the first meeting of the staff for a Hogwarts newspaper founded by “yours truly.”

It was early afternoon on a beautiful spring day, so Harry wasn’t surprised that the pub stayed empty but for the budding ‘reporters.’

“…Of course, old Sluggy and I have become quite close. I don’t want to speak out of turn,” Gilderoy preened, “but, with my help, we are this close to patenting my Lockhart’s Luscious Locks formula!”

The girls cooed.

*I may vomit.*

“…so I told Filius—Professor Flitwick to most students, of course, but we enjoy a more equitable relationship—I told him, ‘Old bean, the trick to a proper Werewolf-Repelling Charm isn’t the flick at the beginning, but the flourish at the end!’”

The girls erupted in rapturous applause.

*Killing a teenager in your own pub is bad, Harry.*

“Well, I’m sorry to say, Cindy my dear, but there’s just no spell that can trump nature when it comes to the perfect smile!”

*Dear God, I will kiss whoever makes this stop.*

A sudden explosion sounded in the distance and a woman outside screamed. “It’s Death Eaters!”

*Oh for fuck’s sake, really?*

But the curl of excitement was already unfolding in his stomach. I can’t believe *I’m grateful for a Death Eater attack.*

“Stay here!” he barked at the kids.

He was hardly surprised when Little Lockhart followed on his heels. “Excellent idea, barkeep, I will likely have need for back-up. Never fear, ladies!”

*No throwing him in front of Death Eaters. No throwing him in front of Death Eaters…*

The spellfire and smoke seemed to be coming from just north of the Head. Harry jogged up past the Prewetts’ towards the intersection of High and Low Street. His mind whirled through possible plans and strategies, his wand firmly in his grip and ready for whatever the Death Eaters wanted to bring.

Rounding the bend by Dervish and Banges, he stopped dead and gaped.

Half a dozen Death Eaters lay bound in front of Spintwitches, three Aurors and Gideon Prewett standing over them.

*What the hell? It’s over already?*

*It hasn’t even been two minutes!*
“They’ve already got the other six in custody down by Scrivenshafts!” a fourth Auror called from down the street. “No sign of any others!”

The surprisingly docile Death Eaters allowed themselves to be manhandled to their feet as an Auror began Apparating them away one by one.

Harry glanced around at the scene. He told himself it was out of professional interest only, and not at all to avoid looking at Gideon.

*The prat is looking everywhere but me!*

The windows in Spintwitches had been shattered and the Wizarding Wireless headquarters was smoking in places from some exploding spell, but that was it. Nothing compared to the more significant damage the Death Eaters had wrought on the village the year before.

*That’s all the damage the six of them could do?*

A hand on his shoulder made him jump. Fabian smiled back at him.

“Not much of a fight, huh? Can’t believe I put on trousers for this.”

Harry huffed a tense laugh. He’d seen Fabian a few times a week at the Head, and the man remained friendly, if neutral, with him.

Gideon had taken his custom elsewhere.

“You know what’s going on?”

The clockmaker shook his head. “Nah, I was following pretty close behind you. Gid was having lunch at the ‘Sticks. I’ll find out from him.”

As Fabian moved over to his brother, Harry noticed Lockhart staring at the scene with hungry eyes.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry I was late! I would have been happy to help corral these miscreants for you,” he proclaimed loudly to a crowd that wasn’t paying him any mind.

*I can’t believe I went from fighting with vigilantes to standing on the sidelines with Gilderoy-fucking-Lockhart.*

*God, I need to get out of this rut.*

As Lockhart prattled on, inspiration struck.

It was childish. And mean. And unfair. And definitely beneath him.

But Gideon wouldn’t even *look* at him.

“Really?” he asked, turning to Lockhart with wide eyes. “You can help? You know, they still might need assistance from someone who knows what they’re doing. You should talk to the redhead with the beard over there.”

Lockhart’s grin grew positively blinding as he moved to introduce himself to a scowling Gideon.

Harry took the opportunity to escape back to the Head.

*I’m a very bad person. Gideon hasn’t done anything to deserve that.*
Yes, I'm a very bad person.

He kicked a rock and watched it roll aimlessly down the street.

God, I seriously need to get out of this rut.

xoxoxox

22 May, 1979

A few days later, the lazy progress of a rainy Tuesday afternoon was interrupted by the door of the Head slamming open.

The werewolves at the corner table tensed as though expecting an attack. Nappy Clank’s bleary eyes slowly widened as he took in the newcomer.

Harry stared, his attempt at finally completing The Prophet’s crossword puzzle completely forgotten.

“Oh! Wow, you’re here...I wasn’t expecting...you...here…” He winced. God, I’m babbling.

Molly Weasley stood in the middle of the public room, her green raincoat dripping puddles onto his floor. “I keep my promises, Aberforth,” she replied in a deadly quiet voice.

“Er—”

“I told you that you’d be answering to me if you hurt my little brother. And I’ve just found out that you hurt him. So,” she drew herself up to her less-than-impressive full height and brandished her wand. “I challenge you to a duel, Harry Aberforth!”

Nappy whistled low.

“Huh?” Harry blinked. Molly Weasley wants to fight me?

“You heard me, Harry!” she snapped.

What the—I don’t even—Christ, is everything just rubbish anymore? Fine! Great!

He sighed and folded his paper. “Okay, Molly. Fine. Have at me then, I guess.”

She looked at him as though he were a complete idiot. “What? But—but that’s not how this works, Harry!”

“Well, I’m not much of a dueler, how should I know? Besides, it’s not like I’m going to fight back. Sorry, but I’m just not going to hurt you.” She bristled, apparently at the insinuation that he could hurt her, but he kept going. “So if you want to, I don’t know, do whatever, go ahead.” He stretched out his arms to offer an easy target.

Molly sputtered. “You’re not even going to fight back? But—but—you have to! I got a babysitter for this! Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find a childminder for five boys like mine?”

“Oh…. Sorry?”

The furious red flush that stole across her face suggested this was not the right thing to say.

“So you break it off with Gideon, leave him broken-hearted, and now you won’t even be man enough to fight me?”
Harry choked out a bitter laugh. “Whoa, he dumped me, just so you know. Not the other way around.” He ignored the fluttering feeling in his stomach that had started at the revelation that Gideon was also unhappy. “So you can just stuff that rubbish, Molly.”

“What? I—but he’s been so morose—oh, I just assumed…” Her face hardened. “Did you step out on him?”

He slumped against the wall behind the bar. “Course not. Hell, I’ve never even had a relationship before. He just…he wanted to know things about me that he deserves to know, but I can’t tell him. That’s all. Not that it’s any of your business.”

Molly studied him for several moments before growling in frustration. “Well I can’t do this if you look so pathetic!”

Harry huffed but didn’t contradict her. “We—er—so, we’re not going to fight then?”

The woman hmpfed and angrily stowed her wand.

He rolled his eyes and studied her for a moment. While Molly might be hot-tempered and acting just the wrong side of ridiculous, he couldn’t help but like her.

Oh what the hell, why not?

“If you aren’t going to curse me, want a drink? You’ve already got a child-minder, after all. Might as well enjoy a quiet afternoon to yourself.”

Her frown was replaced by a thoughtful expression as she glanced around the pub. “That’s….an idea…. This place isn’t quite as filthy as I expected it to be…”

An hour later, Harry topped off Molly’s elderflower wine while she polished off her plate of Guin’s apple crumble.

“You were right,” she said, wiping her mouth with her napkin. “This is delicious.”

He tried not to smile at the begrudging undertone to her compliment. It seemed Molly didn’t take well to competition when it came to her talents in the kitchen. “Guin’ll be glad to hear that.”

She pursed her lips—apparently she doesn’t take well to Guin either—but didn’t comment. “There’s no chance of you and my brother getting back together, then? He’s been moping about for a month, but Fabian only told me what happened yesterday.”

“I get what he wants, I really do, and I it’s only fair, but…. Well, how would you feel if something bad happened, say, to Bill and it wasn’t his fault, but if anyone found out it could be really dangerous for him, so he promised you he’d never tell?” The words came out unbidden in a breathless rush. “Wouldn’t you want Bill to keep his promise not to tell anyone?”

Molly squinted and swirled her drink. “Yes, I’d want to keep them safe. But I would also want them to be happy.”

He frowned. “What if he couldn’t be both?”

They lapsed into a contemplative silence.

“I suppose…well, I’d want to keep him safe, in the end. But beyond that…I would hope that I raised
him well enough to be able to decide for himself when it was the time to keep silent and safe, and when it was time to trust and try for happiness. There’s a time for everything, after all.”

His hand moved to touch the wristwatch that Ab had commissioned Gideon to engrave.

*There is a time for everything.*

“Does that help at all?” She asked curiously.

Harry smiled helplessly. “No idea, really. But thanks, Molly.”

“You do suit him, you know.” She chewed her lip and looked at him thoughtfully. “Perhaps it’ll all work out in the end. But it won’t if you keep avoiding each other, as Fabian told me you’ve both been doing.”

*And now Molly’s trying to get us back together? The woman sure isn’t shy about changing her mind. She came her all furious avenger and now she’s trying to help?*

He coughed awkwardly, “Well, I mean—”

“Have you considered joining the, ah, *group* he belongs to? You’d have a lovely excuse to see him there.”

“What? You mean the—uh, *the* group?”

*God, James Bond characters we are not.*

Rolling his eyes, Harry cast a privacy charm around them.

“Hmm. My Arthur’s recently signed up, though just to help on the back-end. His mate Perkins from the office was arrested two weeks ago for being involved with You-Know-Who. Hard to believe it really, I’d never have expected Twyllo to attack Muggles of all things. Anyway, Arthur’s going to meetings now, and since you know Al—that is to say, the leader so well, I can’t fathom why you aren’t involved.” Her eyes were starting to twinkle. “And you could see Gideon…”

Harry scrubbed his face with his hand and sighed. He’d been thinking seriously about joining the Order for weeks now, as a chance to get of his rut, as a means of contributing to the war.

Hell, at least the Order could tell him *where* the bloody battles were!

At least one former Nine, his regular partner Will Armstrong, had just become a member. The young man had a friend already in its ranks and had stopped in to the Head to see if Harry was interested. At the time, Harry hadn’t wanted it to seem like he was pathetically chasing after Gideon by joining the Order.

Looking back, he wondered if he’d dismissed the whole thing too quickly.

*I mean, really, isn’t it way more pathetic not to help just because of that?*

*Right.*

*Perspective.*

“That’s not a bad idea, I guess, Molly. I would like to do more…but I don’t think it’ll do much for Gideon and me. We’re just…” He made a confused gesture with his hands, unable to articulate further just what he and Gideon were.
“Well then,” she said, rising to her feet and smoothing her dress, “I suppose I should be getting home.”

She was halfway to the door when she turned around, her eyes devilish. “Harry…if anyone asks, would you mind confirming that I trounced you in our duel? I do have a reputation to maintain.”

Harry laughed his first genuine laugh in what felt like weeks. “Yeah, sure. It’ll be years before my fragile little ego recovers from it, don’t worry.”

“And you all?” she asked the table of werewolves and Nappy pointedly.

“Our people will sing songs of your prowess, ma’am,” a werewolf grinned.

“Please don’t hurt me like ya did poor Harry!” Nappy cried, clasping his hands in dramatic supplication. “I’ll do anythin’, anythin’!”

Molly smiled. “Excellent. Thank you gentlemen, Harry.”

As the door closed behind her, Nappy turned to Harry. “Now that’s a fine, fine lady, that is. She ain’t married is she?”

Harry laughed again. “You have absolutely no chance there, mate. No chance.”

28 May, 1979

Harry stared at the blank parchment and fiddled with his quill.

To his side was the day’s *Prophet*, which joyously recounted how a combined force of Aurors and ‘concerned civilians’—*the Order*, Harry surmised—had routed a small force of Death Eaters who’d swept through Hyde Park.

*I hate being useless.*

Biting his lip, he smoothed the parchment unnecessarily. He’d spent six days dithering since Molly’s visit, it was time to *do something*.

*Dammit.*

*There’s nothing for it.*

Shaking his head, he started writing.

*Dear Albus,*

*I am interested in being an affiliate of sorts with your friends. I’d like to speak with you about being included in your next outing, if possible.*

*Sincerely,*

*Harry Aberforth.*

Glaring at the note critically, he finally shrugged. It was the best he could do.

*If I want to fight, I need to be able to find out when and where to fight, for Christ’s sake.*
Great. Another list.

As the barflies bantered, Harry cast a baleful eye on the Friday evening edition of the *Prophet*. It really wasn’t a bad thing, he knew. There’d been yet another failed Death Eater attack, and a record number of captures had been made this time.

But in the past several weeks the lists of the captured had become something of a macabre game that caused just as much pain as it did joy. So far, more than a hundred Death Eaters had been apprehended and at least half of these seemed to be individuals that no one would have ever suspected. With every list people might be dismayed by the discovery that one of their neighbors, co-workers, or old school chums had been in league with the Dark Lord.

Harry had heard that the Leaky Cauldron was running a special that awarded free drinks for a week to anyone who could prove a close, personal connection to three names on a day’s given list.

It wasn’t a game anyone actually wanted to win.

As the regulars prattled on about the Cannons’ near-defeat of the Falcons, he scowled at Rickard Jugson’s name at the top of the list. *That fuck went right back to it after Privet Drive, I guess. A moment later, disgust melted into shock at the sight of two names that made his heart stutter.*

*Vera Shicker*

*Napoleon Clank*

The paper fluttered from Harry’s numb hands.

Down the bar, Wigol Palter muttered something typically incomprehensible and watched Harry with tired eyes.

*Nappy? Nappy? There’s no way he’s a Death Eater!*

*But he hasn’t been in for a few days…*

*And Vera Shicker…that has to be Dalcop’s wife.*

... 

*This can’t be real.*

*It can’t be right.*

“Dalcop,” he said, his voice sounding far away to his own ears. “Where’s Vera?”

The man turned and smiled, gin-blossoms in full bloom across his cheeks, “Vera? Well, I figure she’s gone to her mum’s for a few days or whatnot. Does it often enough—gives me more time with the lads, innat right, boys!” He toasted them to raucous applause.

Harry stared.

“Why you asking, anyways mate?” Dalcop said, his smile fading and a note of fear creeping into his
voice as he looked at Harry’s grim expression. “Harry? Why you asking after my Vera?”

Five minutes later Harry was sprinting from the pub, leaving a broken, sobbing Dalcop in the care of a thoroughly shell-shocked band of barflies. Vera was a blow, but Nappy?

*I bet your parents thought the same thing about Peter,* a quiet voice murmured in his head.

*Oh, sod that! It’s Nappy. He’s harmless!*

*This can’t be right. It just can’t be.*

“I’ll find Dumbledore. I’ll figure this out,” he promised them even as he dashed out the back and sent a patronus message to the headmaster, begging for a meeting.

The man hadn’t yet responded to his letter about joining the Order.

*Shite, what if he’s too busy to answer me?*

But Fawkes appeared in a ball of flames moments later.

Heart thumping wildly, Harry read the note the bird dropped in his hands.

And then he was running headlong for the castle again.

*Slow down and get your mind together, lad,* Ab’s voice admonished him. *Ain’t no good to either of ‘em actin’ like a damn fool.*

*Yeah, I know Ab,* Harry pumped his legs even harder. *But I don’t care.*

As he crested the last hill, Hogwarts came into view, its windows gleaming with the warm glow of candles in the thickening twilight.

*Gate—gate—Albus said there was a hidden gate this way…Find it and send message again!*

*You really sure this is an emergency?* Ab asked quietly. *You sure you’re sure about them?*

*Gate—where the hell—yes, Ab, I’m sure!*

*Or…?*

*I don’t know! But it feels seriously fucking wrong!*

Finally he caught sight of a small gate overgrown with ivy. Panting, he cast another patronus messenger.

A few heartbeats later and he was shocked to be entering directly into the Headmaster’s office. “What the—?”

“Harry,” Dumbledore smiled tiredly from his desk. “I see you found the more direct route to my chambers. Whatever is the mater? If this is about Malfoy or your…your father—"

Harry waved him silent. “Vera Shicker and Nappy Clank,” he said shortly, still trying to catch his breath. “They were on the list today, but there’s no way they’re Death Eaters. This is…something’s going on that’s really not right, Albus.”

The older man looked at him calmly, and a niggle of doubt worked its way into Harry. *Is this…am I*
wrong? Is this not an emergency?

“I agree, Harry.”

“—What?”

Dumbledore sighed and motioned for him to sit down. “I’ve been following the lists quite closely, though as Chief Warlock I’m allowed no contact with those arrested until their trials. I’m sure you’ve noticed that, among the unremarkable foreigners and sons of high-ranking purebloods, are quite a few people one would not expect, yes?”

Harry nodded impatiently.

“What far fewer have noticed is that most of these unexpected Death Eaters live alone or do not have close families. What no one other than myself and some of the older teachers at Hogwarts would recognize, however, is that not a single one was in any way a gifted student. Not one.”

“I don’t…. What are you talking about?”

The headmaster steepled his fingers and stared into the merrily blazing fire. “That last similarity only became apparent to me after the list published earlier this week, and tonight’s list confirms my suspicions. In addition to being lackluster witches and wizards, I can also say that none of their number bear the Dark Mark. The Ministry is currently working under the assumption that they were captured during initiation raids, and thus have not yet earned it.”

Harry wrinkled his brow. “But all their initiation raids this year have been against Muggleborn residences, not flashy public places, haven’t they?”

Dumbledore gave him a shrewd look which Harry ignored. “Indeed? I was not aware of that pattern. But no matter,” he continued smoothly. “Consider this: you have a group of people whose closest associates would never suspect them of Death Eater sympathies, who do not bear the Mark, and who lack any trace of the magical skill that Voldemort values in his subordinates. Given these conditions, what would you conclude?”

“That…that…” Harry thought of Nappy Clank, “…that they aren’t really Death Eaters, are they? That they’re something else”

“Ten points to the House of your choosing, Mr. Aberforth.” The Headmaster smiled at him, though his eyes remained grave.

*Jesus, shit.*

“Well, what are they then, Albus? And why were they fighting alongside actual Death Eaters?”

Albus sighed and rubbed his temple. “While I have suspicions, at this point there is no *proof* that they are not willingly involved with your fath—ah, Tom.”

Harry barely kept from slamming his fist down on the Headmaster’s desk. *There are more important things happening here!* “Dammit, Albus, I’ve *told* you! Voldemort isn’t my damn dad!”

“Of course, my apologies,” the man said mildly. “And for now, at least, other considerations must be our priority.”

Harry sighed.
The two sat in contemplative silence for awhile, as both younger and older wizard mentally reviewed the little they know and the bit more they suspected.

“Oh, my manners!” Albus suddenly said, making him jump. “Tea, Harry?”

“No thanks. I just, I need to wrap my mind around this. And I have to figure out what to tell everyone. They’re all back at the pub, and Dalcop’s really lost it. What…what do you think I should tell him?”

The headmaster watched a young Fawkes grooming his feathers. “I doubt there is much to be done until the trials begin, but I am hopeful that—”

They were interrupted by the arrival of a patronus bulldog that lumbered in through the outer castle wall.

“Prisoners are escaping! All of them! Get everybody here!” Mad-Eye Moody’s voice barked.

Nappy Clank is escaping from the Ministry? Has the whole world gone mad? Harry thought dumbly.

But Dumbledore was already on his feet, eyes blazing, his magic gathering with an almost unbearable pressure. Harry was forcibly reminded that the headmaster was said to be one of the most powerful wizards alive. I’ve never even seen the man fight, but damn if I don’t believe that now.

“Fawkes, alert the Order.” The phoenix arched its wings. “Have them meet at the Bones’ house.”

As the majestic bird disappeared in a ball of flames, Dumbledore fixed his eyes on Harry. “It seems we’re in for an interesting night. Are you still interested in fighting with the Order, Harry?”

His adrenaline was already pumping. “Fuck yes, Albus.”

“Then take my arm.”

Chapter End Notes

Next on The Second String: Things go to hell in Chapter 32, “Fear and Loathing on Level Eleven,” the action climax of Arc III.

Note: A number of people on FFN especially have asked if this story will be completed here, or if there will be a sequel. If you're wondering this, please know that there will not be a sequel. It firmly concludes in Chapter 44.

Thanks to Christina, CrowManifesto, Jadejabberwock, and Shadowstouch for pre-reading this chapter.

(And folks who pre-read 31 and/or 32: I’m easily confused and keep mixing up your ao3 handles with your google drive handles. If I’ve left you out of thanks note by accident, please let me know!)

As always, thank you so much for reading and for your reviews!
Finally, **huge thanks to my wonderful beta AverageFish.** Check out their stories on FFN, author ID: 8207725
Dumbledore Apparated them to the front stoop of a grand Georgian house before Harry could take another breath. The headmaster swept inside without knocking.

A blonde woman holding a sleepy toddler rushed over. “They’re gathering in the drawing room.”

Mad-Eye Moody suddenly stalked through the front door behind him, followed closely by two women Harry recognised as Order members who’d gone ‘undercover’ in the Head.

No one spoke.

Inside a rather opulent drawing room, a crowd of people, some familiar to Harry, some not, were talking furiously in small groups. He spied James, Lily, and Sirius, Jinky Fenwick’s son, and, off in a corner next to a lanky woman, his old Nines partner Will Armstrong.

“Hey, good to see you,” Will muttered as Harry left Dumbledore’s side and joined his friend. “Harry, this is Dorcas Meadowes, a friend from Hogwarts. Dory, Harry Aberforth.” The woman nodded.

“You know what’s going on?”

“Prisoners escaping from the Ministry,” Harry murmured, staring at the door as Professor McGonagall bustled in with the Prewett brothers in tow.

Although Fabian caught his eye and smiled, Gideon just looked at Harry with that damned inscrutable expression of his.

Suppressing a frown, Harry focused on Dumbledore instead, who was conversing rapidly with Moody. He watched as the arriving Longbottoms, clad in their red Auror robes, joined them.

After a few minutes of hurried discussion, Dumbledore turned to the expectant crowd, which now numbered about thirty.

“My friends, I have grave news. Before losing contact, Auror Abernathy alerted Alastor that there has been a mass breakout of the Ministry holding cells. So far as we can tell, all one hundred and twenty-two prisoners were freed as of about eight minutes ago.”

He paused as the room gasped.

“Fortunately, someone at the Atrium guard station was alerted by the Prewetts’ wonderful clock and instigated the emergency lock-down. At present, all Floos are unavailable, and unauthorized Apparition and Portkeys are prevented. However, we have intelligence that, prior to the lockdown, a group of people did infiltrate the Ministry by means unknown. These are, I’m afraid, almost certainly Death Eaters.”

“What do they want, Albus?” a pale Minerva McGonagall asked.
The headmaster shook his head. “We do not know. Our limited information suggests only that the prisoners and these Death Eaters are still in the Ministry, and we can only infer that they have commenced hostilities. As it is late on a Friday evening, there should be fewer Ministry employees present, making it all the easier for them to gain control of the building.” He surveyed the stunned Order. “We must not let this happen.”

Harry found himself nodding.

“We shall form several teams of three, each team under the command of a Ministry employee with clearance, and divide our forces. Half will come with me to my office in the ICW, to which I retain authorised Portkey access. The other half will go with Auror Moody to the Security Apparation station in the Atrium. Team captains will communicate through Auror Lapel Pins—those captains who are not Aurors may retrieve one from Alastor.”

He surveyed the room, his face grave. “Questions?”

Lily raised her hand tentatively. “Sir, if the DMLE is compromised, what are the...the limits to our use of force?”

The room became very, very still.

Albus closed his eyes. “I must leave that to your best judgement. However, I sincerely doubt any of our members will be prosecuted for defending the Ministry, their comrades, or themselves.”

Harry bit his lip. That’s not enough direction, dammit!

From the fidgeting of some of the others, he suspected the sentiment was shared.

“Before we divide,” the headmaster continued in a less subdued voice, “please note that three new individuals are in attendance tonight, all of whom have been cleared by me. If you do not know them, please—”

“Don’t curse them!” Fabian grinned.

“Quite, Mr. Prewett. They are Mr. William Armstrong, Mr. Harry Aberforth, and Mr. Benjamin, ah, Benjy Fenwick.”

The new recruits nodded curtly. Harry tried not to notice Alice and Gideon giving him sidelong glances, and instead returned Lily’s small half-smile.

“Now, form teams, and quickly!”

Harry looked immediately at Will, who grinned. Yeah, this isn’t anything new for us.


The woman raised an eyebrow and inclined her head before going to get whatever an Auror Pin was.

Will watched her go. “We’ll probably have to watch out for her, Harry. She wasn’t a bad dueler in school, but she works for the Accidental Magical Reversal Squad now. I’m not sure how much real action she’s seen.”

He nodded absently, sighing with relief when Lily and James joined Moody. Sirius paired with a pretty woman whom Harry vaguely recognised—Maria? Marlene?—and then joined Frank
Longbottom. Alice stood with the Benjy, the other new recruit, and a woman with feathered blonde hair.

_Don’t look at Gideon, don’t look at Gideon._

Turning to Gideon, he wasn’t surprised to see him stick with Fabian, but he narrowed his eyes when their Ministry captain, some woman who’d been with them at the Head before, stood _awfully_ close to his boyfriend.

_Ex-boyfriend._

He shook his head. _I don’t have time for this._

“All right, gather with either myself or Alastor. And good luck to you all.”

Harry and Will followed Dorcas to Dumbledore’s side of the room, where they were joined by Frank’s team—Sirius blew a kiss at Harry—and a team with two unknown men and Professor McGonagall. Two other groups came up as well, but Harry knew none of their members.

All grabbed the long piece of rope that Dumbledore produced with an encouraging smile. “Portkey on three, two, one—”

_xoxoxox_

It was absolutely silent in Albus’ posh ICW office. Harry wasn’t sure what he had expected—fire, smoke, screaming—but the darkened room, lit only by a few candles burning red for the lockdown, seemed all the more unnatural for its stillness.

When the headmaster turned to address them, he was every bit the general. Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

“Mr. Longbottom, Ms. Meadowes, we must know if the DMLE has held out against attack. Your teams are to go to up to Level Two to survey the situation. Liaise with any Aurors you find on duty. Mr. Constans, Mr. Criddle, take your teams down one level to the Department of Magical Transportation and assess the condition of the national Floo system. Edgar, with Minerva on your team, I want you to concentrate on defending the lifts. Shut down all of them but three, and use whatever means you deem necessary to ensure our ability to move in the Ministry and to stymie our opposition’s. I shall search the executive offices for Millicent Bagnold and any others who may be of service to us or in need of rescue.”

His words were met with only silent nods and grave eyes.

“I wish I could tell you what dangers to expect out there, my friends,” Dumbledore sighed. “But good luck. Good luck to us all.”

_xoxoxox_

The gold-patterned carpet of Level Five dampened the sound of their footsteps as the teams headed through the darkened hallways towards the lifts.

“Every team in an elevator,” the man named Edgar ordered. “Minerva, after they’re where they need to go, start shutting most of them down. Frank, take your elevator to the Aurors’ entrance of the DMLE. Meadowes, have your team go to the Visitors’ Entrance.”

The tall woman next to Harry nodded, and together he, Dorcas and Will trooped into the closest lift.
Harry’s knuckles turned white as they rose, swooped, and zig-zagged through a labyrinthine tunnel system until finally creaking to a stop.

“Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Visitor’s Entrance,” the posh female voice intoned.

Darkness and silence.

From the lift Harry spied a long glass wall straight ahead of them through which he could make out the shadows of cubicles. The wall was framed by a number of ornate marble columns, all topped with busts of men and women he assumed were famous for something or other.

He glared as the heads slowly turned and opened their eyes, staring down at the team with eerie indifference.

“I guess…I guess all the Aurors are fighting elsewhere in the Ministry,” Dorcas murmured, “though someone really should always be stationed in the main office. Abernathy was on duty but…”

Harry gripped his wand more tightly.

One of the busts smirked at him.

“Right then. We have to check to make sure the Aurors haven’t been ambushed inside,” Dorcas continued in a tight voice “I’ll take point. Aberforth, you take central position and do forward shields. Will, rear guard.”

The more offensive point position would have been his first choice. She had never fought with him before though, so he said nothing and shadowed Dorcas as she cast a series of detection spells on the double glass doors.

“It’s clear.”

The outer office of the DMLE, lit only by the red glow of a few candles, was as silent as the rest of the Ministry. Everything seemed to be in order, as if all the Aurors had simply left for the weekend or were out in the field.

As they passed the third row of cubicles and drew near the center of the room, Dorcas gasped. “Abernathy!”

A young man in Auror robes was lying prone in a thick pool of blood. Harry heard an unnatural, high-pitched whine the moment the woman approached the body.

It’s like the Chamber. Tripline, fuck!

Without thinking he snapped up his strongest all-purpose shield in front of Meadowes and summoned her to himself wandlessly.

“Harry, what the hell—”

Will’s cry was cut off by the world exploding.

xoxoxox

Harry blinked his eyes open and saw only fire and rubble.

“—ry!”
Huh? He shook his head dazedly, trying to clear away the confusion.

Wait...is someone shouting?

“Harry! Come on, mate, we gotta get out of here!”

Will. That’s Will...Fuck, we’re in the DMLE and everything—

“Dammit, Harry!” A hand wrenched him up by his armpit. “Everything’s coming down. Your shield fell!”

Clarity washed over him as waves flames began to surround them.

“Will—Dorcas?” he coughed through the smoke.

“Got her out, now get moving!”

The other man half-dragged him into the hallway, slamming and sealing the glass doors behind them, even as a crest of flames rushed headlong in their wake.

From the hallway floor, both men sent desperate spells designed to retard fire at the wall. In seconds, nothing was visible in the DMLE but the undulation of a tower of flames against the glass.

Jesus, fuck.

Get up, get up!

“Those charms won’t hold that long, we have to get out of here, Harry!”

“Dorc—” he started, glancing over towards the woman who was laying face down on the carpet.

Will looked away and frantically pressed the lift button. “She’s—she’s gone. Your shield was good, b-but that was one hell of an explosion.”

Goddammit all.

Harry crawled over, trying not to notice the gashes and burns that ravaged the woman’s body as he turned her on her back and gently closed her eyes.

A moment later he ripped the woman’s outer robe from her body. He slung it around his shoulders and answered Will’s unvoiced shock at this actions. “There’s some sort of Auror communicator thing on this, right? We need it.”

Fractures began to snake across the glass.

“Yeah, Will, it’s time to go.”

Suddenly Frank Longbottom’s staticky voice broke into his head. “Dorcas! What the fuck is going on over there?”

Er...

Harry fumbled on the bloody robes until he found a metal pin. What the hell. He held onto it and thought as hard as he could.

“Frank? Frank, can you hear me?”
“…Harry?”

“Yeah. Dorcas is gone. Massive explosion. Whole place is probably rigged with spells. If you’re in there somewhere, get out now!”

“Got it. Head to the Atrium, I guess. Fighting going on there. If you haven’t worked it out yet, if the pin’s on you, you can hear us. To send messages, just hold it and focus on who you want to talk to.”

Will was still hitting the button for the lift, his face desperate, as a few tendrils of smoke escaped into the hallway.

Harry stared in horror at the buckling glass that separated them from a tidal wave of flames.

“Anytime now mate…”

A massive crack suddenly shrieked across the glass wall of the DMLE.

He grasped the metal pin again. “Uh…Edgar! We need a lift on Level Two like now!”

A man’s breathless voice cut into his head. “Little busy right now, whoever you are! Hold position.”

The glass started to bubble under the blistering heat.

Well fuck this!

He and Will shared a glance. As one they sent spells to force the lift grate open.

“After you, mate,” Will panted.

Harry led the way into the pitch-black lift tunnel.

xoxoxox

This makes no sense.

Jogging through the shaft by the dim light of two Lumos spells, Harry could only shake his head. He’d expected to have to conjure ropes and start climbing down the tunnel, since he distinctly recalled feeling like the lift had carried him up to Level Two.

But the tunnel simply stretched out horizontally.

A sudden explosion behind them echoed through the shaft.

“Shite, there went the DMLE!” Will shouted and took off.

Harry imagined the wall of fire headed their way. Yeah. Must run faster.

Moments later, he and Will rounded an innocuous-looking bend to the left and—

“AAAAAHH!”

Harry’s scream joined his partner’s.

Although their feet should have been planted safely on the floor, they suddenly found themselves plummeting sideways at breakneck speed through the faint clouds of turquoise mist that filled the shaft.
Before he could think, the tunnel veered to the right, and now his stomach insisted he was falling upwards, desperately clawing at what had been the ceiling.

“What the fuck Harry?” Will screamed, his falling form blurred by the fog.

“Gravity’s gone wonky!” he called back as his stomach lurched again.

“No, really?”

The pair were rapidly approaching a bend in the shaft. Harry desperately called out an *Arresto Momentum*...that did absolutely nothing.

He could only scrunch his eyes closed and wait for the slam of his body against stone.

And then they somehow turned mid-fall, his shoulder scraping what had been the floor as he continued falling in yet another direction.

*It’s the blue mist, it’s something to do with the mist,* his mind shrieked.

He had a hazy memory of hanging upside-down in a yellow fog...

... *The third task...the upside-down mist!*

*Please be like that.*

He closed his eyes and forced himself to believe he was walking perfectly normally, feet firmly on the ground like they should be.

His face immediately met the ‘floor’ of the shaft.

*Actually, this looks to be one of the walls, but whatever.*

*God, no wonder Dalcop drinks as much as he does if he has to spend his days in this place.*

Shaking his head, he got to his feet and ran at a neat ninety degree angle from the floor in the direction Will was still falling.

“Will! It’s the mist! You have to believe that gravity’s working right! Close your eyes and imagine it!”

“Are you insa—?”

“Do it!”

“Christ, Harry, I can’t just—”

“Now, Will!”

A tense moment of silence was followed by a heavy *thunk* up ahead. Harry crested a turn and had to fight another change in gravity as the shaft veered downwards but Will was somehow sitting on the ceiling, nursing his shoulder.

“Wizards can be really fucked up, mate” Will muttered darkly.

*Too right, that.*
Harry helped his friend to his feet. “Guess the gravity mists or whatever are why people in the lifts aren’t, I dunno, falling all over the place when the shaft bends?” He shrugged. “Anyway, come on, we need to head—er—downish?”

Will gave him a look that begged him to explain exactly which way was ‘downish,’ but Harry was saved by the voice of Edgar Whoever suddenly in his head.

“We’ve got a lift coming for you—figure you must be Dorcas’ team on Level Two—sorry for the delay but we had a spot of trouble. Take it down to Level Nine. More are needed lower than the Atrium.”

He sighed in relief. “It’s okay, Will. Lift is coming.”

Will’s eyes widened as he looked around the perfectly square tunnel.

A horrible sound, both thunderous and screeching, rumbled from what he assumed was below them.

“Harry…the lift takes up the whole shaft.”

The rumbling grew louder.

Oh, that’s seriously not good.

“Cancel the lift Edgar! We’re in the shaft! Stop it!” he screamed in his mind.

“Shit! Get the fuck out of there, kid, they take a few floors to brake!”

“He said they take a few floors to brake,” Harry repeated dumbly.

The pair looked at each other and started to run away from the noise.

“You know a spell that can help with this?” he shouted at Will. “Impedimenta?”

“Your funeral, Harry!”

Behind them a lift barreled into sight even as its brakes sheared the walls with pink and green sparks.

Come on, Dalcop, tell me you serviced the lift recently.

Racing headlong, Harry spied a large arch in the floor ahead of him with the words Level Four: Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, Beings Division written above a grated entrance.

He and Will spared each other another glance. A volley of spells forced the grate open and they jumped down, only to fall sideways onto the floor of the department. A heartbeat later the lift screamed past.

“Y’know,” Will wheezed, “I’m not sure I want to join the Order anymore.”

“You realise we haven’t even fought anyone yet?” Harry laughed a little hysterically.

And then he looked up.

What the hell?

He felt Will tense beside him as his own body froze in horror.
Eight identical figures in Unspeakables’ uniforms stared down at him.

“We know all about you,” one said softly.

“No.

“We know where you’re from.”

Another stepped forward. “We know who you really are.”

“No, please.

“You’re done helping here,” a fourth said with relish.

Harry’s wand hand was shaking uncontrollably.

Another Unspeakable opened his mouth to speak.

But then he promptly turned into a pregnant woman.

“Dean? Dean, what’s going on?” Her voice was frail and hollow, the front of her blue dress stained with thick streams of blood.

“No! This can’t be real!” Will gasped next to him.

The sixth and seventh Unspeakables shifted into the same, bleeding woman. “Why weren’t you here, Dean?”

“They came with sticks in their hands, saying funny words…I needed you, where were you?”

“Nooo!” his friend screamed, his eyes bulging wildly.

Harry suddenly understood exactly what was happening.

*There’s no way we can laugh right now.*

He had to look away from the triad of dying girls, even though he knew they weren’t real.

“*Depulso!*”

The spell sent the Unspeakables and the pregnant women cartwheeling in the air down the hall and through an open doorway. With a flick of his wand Harry shut and sealed the door.

Will was gasping on the floor.

“Hey, Will, it’s okay! Those were just boggarts, just boggarts mate! It’s okay! We’re in the Beings Division, remember? They, I dunno, they must have been stored here and gotten out somehow.”

His partner burst into tears.

Harry stared, completely at a loss what to do with a sobbing adult. He awkwardly started rubbing Will’s back, repeating “It wasn’t real, Will, just boggarts,” in the sort of low, comforting voice he used on distressed goats and weepy drunks.

After a few minutes, Will’s sobs began to subside. “Shit, suh-sorry, mate. Really. She…she’s my
girl, you know? And she just told me last week about the baby, an’ I—an’ I still haven’t told her about magic or even my real name…just want to keep her away from all this shit, yeah?”

Harry nodded and tried to give him a reassuring smile, though Will’s confession struck him more deeply than he’d like. “Yeah. Fucking boggarts.” He patted the man’s shoulder and stood up. “I’m going to tell Edgar we need the lift on this floor, just take a second.”

His back was turned and his mind on his communication when Will spoke up again in a strangely slow voice.

“Um…Harry…I’m not actually that scared of dogs.”

“Yeah, sending another up to you now. Nine is secure, Ten’s bedlam. Get there.” Edgar ordered.

“Huh? What was that Will?”

“I’m…not…scared…of…dogs…”

“What’re you—?” Fearing that Will was going a bit mental after the encounter with the boggarts, Harry turned.

Oh.

Oh yeah. Magical Creatures Division.

“I guess it wasn’t just the boggarts that got out,” he breathed.

Down the hallway stood a pack of tall hounds, dim and silvery as ghosts, baring their razor-sharp teeth and thrashing their forked tails back and forth.

“Uh, know what they are, Will?”

His partner choked out a panicked laugh. “Bad doggies?”

The front two dogs crouched back on their haunches, muscles taut and ready to pounce.

“Yeah…yeah, bad dogs,” Harry muttered dumbly. “Fire, maybe?” Will nodded and cast an *Incendio Telum* as Harry raised a fire wall.

The pack jumped through the flames and raced towards them.

*Oh fuck shit.*

Without thinking Harry pulled Will by the robes and threw them both back into the lift shaft.

He didn’t even have time to scream before their fall ended abruptly with pain and two loud *thunks.*

And now we’re on top of the lift that was coming to our floor. Brilliant.

Harry wrenched open the emergency exit panel in the lift’s ceiling and watched as Will scrambled in.

Before he could follow, two of the ghostly hounds leapt through the open grate and landed next to him on top of the lift.

“Get in here!” Will called, and Harry unceremoniously hurled himself through the hatch.

He wasn’t fast enough. One of the hounds latched onto his ankle, falling with him into the lift.
Several voices raised in alarm, there was a very bright light, and the beast no longer seemed to be biting him.

The grinning face of Sirius Black suddenly appeared over him. “You got your arse kicked by a gytrash, Squibulus? Hell, all you need is one pretty, pretty light and they disappear, as long as it’s not fire. They love a good fire.” Frank Longbottom and the pretty woman—Marlene something?—looked equally amused.

“Never—never heard of them,” he grumbled back. Christ, my blood feels like it’s on fire. “Those, uh, git-things aren’t poisonous, are they?”

The woman’s face turned concerned and she put a hand on his shoulder.

“Really very,” Sirius shrugged. “Ah, don’t worry Marlene, he’s fine! Or fine-ish. Needs a few more bites for it to be dangerous.”

Brilliant. Harry grabbed a tiny bezoar from his mokeskin bag and swallowed it. A few moments later the pain in his veins receded and he cast a quick healing charm on the bite.


As he got to his feet, he caught Will looking at him curiously.

Great. He’s got to be wondering why my boggart is an Unspeakable. Just lovely.

But that was a worry for later. A bing sounded in the lift and the automated voice announced, “Level Ten: Courtrooms and Holding Facilities, Main Entrance.”

They barely had time to snap up shields before a volley of spells sped through the grate and into the lift.

Well, we found the battle.

xoxoxox


“You okay back there?” Harry called over his shoulder. When they’d entered the battle that was raging through the black-bricked hallways of Level Ten, he and Will had immediately fallen into the basic strikeman/shieldman roles that they’d assumed on missions for the Nines.

Every so often he spied another Order member or the occasional Auror fighting against the vastly larger number of prisoners. At one point it was Lily, at another James, but then in a blur they were gone again.

“I got your back still, mate,” Will shouted back. “Keep moving forward!”

Thank God they’re all in prison uniforms, or this would be impossible, Harry thought as he continued firing string after string of lethal and debilitating spells. Against these numbers, creativity and finesse seemed pointless.

We just have to keep hacking through them.

Left – Blood boiler – Left still! – Expul – Fuck!
They rolled out of the way as venomous green Killing Curses streaked towards them from both sides. Harry looked left in time to see Frank Longbottom shoot a seething yellow spell at one of his attackers. The man fell, gasping out his last breath.

“Thanks, Frank!”

More came. They came and just kept on coming. The enemy was little more than barely-glimpsed faces and flashing spells, but Harry slowly realised that it was their numbers, not their talent, that made the battle so dangerous.

While the red-robed bodies of some Aurors—as well as a few apparent civilians—were scattered about the halls, the clear majority of casualties came from the escaping prisoners.

A vague curl of dread started to unfold in him.

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Right – Incendio Telum – Right again – There’s something really weird about – Confringo – this battle…
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As he and Will pushed their way down yet another corridor, Harry split his mind between the fight itself and trying to riddle out what why his instincts were protesting that there was something he needed to notice.

*There’s something missing…*

Turning to aim another curse at middle-aged woman in prison garb, he caught sight of James taking down an opponent while Lily threw up a shield to protect his back.

“Dammit, Harry, pay attention!” Will yelled as he barely managed to avert an incoming spell with a *Protego Maximus*.

“Shit, sorry,” he muttered. *Fuck, kid, keep your head in the battle!* Caffrey Burke’s voice shouted at him. He forced himself to look away from his parents’ counterparts. A moment later his Fire Whip neatly cleaved through the midsections of two more prisoners. They fell in silence.

The next thing he knew, they were being forced through a doorway into what Harry suddenly realised was Courtroom Ten. *Oh, well, perfect.*

They ran down the aisles toward the wall with the judges’ benches, a band of prisoners on their heels.

One was a stringy, bleary-eyed man who gazed at Harry blankly even as he raised his wand.

Harry felt rooted to the spot.

No. It just can’t be.

“Nappy? Nappy, what are you doing? Why—”

But a curse was already on the lips of another attacker, and he had to turn away from the barfly (his mind screamed) to spear them with a fire javelin. The falling man’s wand shot off his final spell as his body arced back.

Harry couldn’t tear his eyes from the seething red bolt that shot upwards and slammed into the massive chandelier overhead.

He was already wrenching Will out of the way when his partner snapped up a desperate shield to
block the spells Nappy and the remaining prisoners were aiming at them.

Stars exploded in Harry’s head as it struck the solid British oak of the judges’ platform and was showered with broken glass.

*Get up, get up!*

He got up, ignoring the shaking of his legs.

The chandelier had crashed down in the center of the courtroom. The bodies of two of the remaining attackers peeked out from underneath, and Harry’s quick cutting curse lashed through the throat of another in a hissing spray of blood.

*Only one left, then.*

Harry spun around.

Nappy was staring at him.

*This can’t be real. It can’t be right.*

“Dammit, Nappy, *why?*”

“Avada Kedavra.”

He could only dive out the way again as Nappy’s Killing Curse, a weak green streak that left him wondering if it were even fatal, sped through the courtroom and impacted the wood right behind where his chest had been.

“*Confringo!*” a voice called from the doorway. Nappy fell, his chest exploding outwards with a sickening crack of bone, revealing Sirius Black standing behind him. His godfather’s counterpart gave Harry an uncharacteristically grim nod and then moved away from the entrance, presumably to continue with another opponent.

*Nappy. Nappy. What the fuck? I don’t underst…*

*No time. He tried to kill me. Get back to the fight. Deal with the rest later.*

“C’mon, Will, job’s not done yet,” he choked out and looked over at his partner.

Will lay against the judge’s platform, his head covered in blood and his torso perforated by long shards of broken chandelier glass.

“Will? Will!” Harry dove to his side and quickly started casting spells to safely remove the glass, spells to clot the blood, spells to try to mend the man’s shredded body.

Will looked up at him and sputtered blood through his teeth.

“You lie still, I can heal this, I can just…just don’t move,” Harry muttered, his wand tracing his desperation as it flicked spell after spell.

Will brought his own hand, still holding his wand, to Harry’s and tried to grasp it. “Harry…my girl, Marina…”

“You’ll tell her just as soon as I get you patched up, mate.” One particularly large wedge of glass was lodged in deep in the man’s chest. *Shite, that has to be hitting his lungs, maybe more. But if I*
remove it, he’ll probably bleed out more quickly….What do I do? What the hell would Poppy do?
“You still with me, Will?”

He glanced at the man’s face.

Will stared back. His wand had fell from his hand.

No, fuck. No!

He felt himself cast another healing charm. It fizzled. Another. It fizzled.

The panting breaths of a single person were the only sound in Courtroom Ten.

Oh goddammit, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Will.

Harry closed his partner’s eyes with a trembling hand. He got to his feet in a daze, barely noticing when he pocketed Will’s wand with the numb promise, I’ll tell her. And I’ll get your wand to her.

The sight of Nappy’s corpse stung his eyes.

Why? Why?…He wouldn’t even speak to me! Christ, why did he even bother fighting us in the first place? You’d think escaped prisoners would care more about actually escaping than fighting, even if they are Death Eaters!

The sprawled bodies of his enemies offered no illumination.

Wait.

Really, why would they fight like this? All it does is waste their time. Why wouldn’t they focus on escaping?


Realisation slammed into him so hard he nearly saw stars again.

They’re not Death Eaters at all.

Albus was right.

His mind buzzed with sudden comprehension. The battle was all wrong! Every other battle—on The Delight, with the Nines, hell, even what I saw of Gringotts Plaza—in all of them both sides used shields. He recalled the last twenty minutes in a lightning-fast rush. None of the prisoners used shields. None of them even ducked. At all. Just offensive spells, and often not very good ones.

And…

He glanced at Nappy again.

And none of them spoke other than to say spells. No taunting, no spouting off about Mudbloods, no telling me to fuck my mother. Nothing.

His hand was on the Auror Pin and he was shouting with his mind before he realised it. “Moody! It’s Aberforth. I don’t think they’re real Death Eaters! They’re like…they’re just patsies, I think! There’s more going on than—”
“I know,” Mad-Eye snapped, “meeting at the lifts, get your arse here now!”

With a final long look at Will and Nappy, Harry ran.

xoxoxox

The battle on Level Ten seemed to be over.

Alice was sobbing when Harry approached the group of Order members gathering at the lift. Lily looked pale and had streaks of blood down an arm. Darkening bruises stood out against the uncharacteristic pallor of James’ complexion.

Really, everybody looks banged up.

But they’re alive.

A bloodied Sirius caught his look of concern at Alice’s tear-stained face and muttered, “Frank’s down. Still alive so far, but we had to use his Auror Pin to Portkey him out. Same with Marlene.”

Shit.

“Will’s…he’s gone,” he responded in a voice that didn’t sound like his own. Get yourself together. “Have we lost anyone else?”

“Yeah.” Sirius didn’t elaborate. Harry’s heart stuttered with concern for the Prewetts—where are they? Are they okay?

Worry later. They’re smart and they’re together.

Moody stumped up. “We’ve got a problem,” he grunted without preamble. “Anyone’s been in any kind of real fight knows this one was five kinds of fucked.”

“No shields,” a man Harry didn’t know murmured.

“No talking,” Lily added.

“No defenses at all, really,” Sirius finished.

“Aye,” the old Auror nodded. “And it didn’t seem like they cared much for escaping once they were out of their cells. None of the ones in the Atrium even attempted to use the Floo or use the Visitors’ exit.” Mad-Eye’s shoulder sagged, his face looking as old as Harry had ever seen it. “Aberforth here called ‘em patsies. Anyone doubt he’s right?”

Alice raised her eyes. “They were all wrong. Just…blank…”

Like…

Just like…

Oh fuck.

Like Krum in the maze.

“They were planted here, weren’t they?” he whispered in dawning horror. “They weren’t Death Eaters at all. Just…people. Regular people.” He licked his lips, suddenly sure he was right. “People under the Imperius curse.”
Oh God, I killed innocent people. They couldn’t help what they were doing. Oh God oh fuck oh God…

The Order’s harsh gasps echoing in the black hallway somehow helped stave off his panic.

Moody nodded slowly, his eye haunted. “S’what I’m thinking….I don’t suppose it’d be too hard. Just Imperius them to get them arrested and let the curse drop once they were in custody. All claimed they were innocent, of course, but there were so many we didn’t have time to even interview them yet.” He spat on the ground. “And we know the Ministry was seeded with You-Know-Who’s spies. All he’d need to do is to get his people on the inside to cast the Imperius on them again when the time was right, open their cells, and slip them wands. A small enough group of skilled Death Eaters with Ministry access could get it done. Especially if he had an Auror or two in his ranks.”

Watching horrified comprehension settle on that many battle-worn faces made Harry want to run back to the Head and get blindingly drunk.

Lily retched in a corner as a dead-eyed James stroked her back.

A man whose name he didn’t know sat down and stared at his wand.

Alice just blinked and looked around as though she couldn’t understand where she was.

Harry felt his mind beginning to fray with the horror of it all and wrenched himself back to the moment. Stay alive now to lose your shit later.

Moody eyed the disintegrating group with a piercing glare. “All right, we need to keep ourselves together! Anyone here fight anyone we actually know is a real, marked Death Eater?”

The Order and what Harry suspected were a few unaffiliated random Aurors looked at him with wide eyes.

“Didn’t think so.”

“So why do any of this?” James bit out in frustration. “I mean, what’s the point? To get us here and hurt as many innocent people as possible?”

Sirius clasped his friend’s shoulder. “That’s just it, I think. To get us here without sacrificing his own people….It’s a distraction, isn’t it, Mad-Eye?”

Harry’s stomach sank as he found himself agreeing.

It was a weedy youngish man he thought might be named Ogden who asked what they were all thinking. “A distraction from what, though?”

Moody chewed his lip. “I’m guessing it’s from something in the building. Yeah, communications with the outside are arsed by now, but if something even bigger were going on out there, someone would have sent me a patronus at least. No, I’m guessing it’s going on here, and our missing real Death Eaters are wherever it’s happening.”

Lily sat up, wiping her mouth. “But the Order has been to almost every level! Except maybe the Magical Creatures Regulation—”

“Nope, been there. Creatures are loose but it seemed empty otherwise,” Harry interjected.

“All right,” she continued. “All the ICW and executive Ministry offices are empty. Dumbledore
confirmed that before he had to leave, right Alastor?"

Harry looked up sharply at that as Mad-Eye nodded.

Lily chewed her lip. “The Unspeakables completely locked down Level Nine and evacuated, and they didn’t think they’d been breached. And the Atrium has a number of captured prisoners that the Prewetts and the others are guarding—”

*Oh thank you God.*

“—so where could something actually be happening?”

The small crowd lapsed into silence.

“Well,” Alice said slowly, “I don’t think anyone’s been to the storage basement yet. Though I can’t think what would interest You-Know-Who down there.”

From the look Moody shot her, Harry was certain his night wasn’t over yet.

xoxoxox

The long, freestanding spiral stairway down to what Moody called ‘Level Eleven’ almost made him yearn for the lifts, death-traps though they may be.

Hewn from earth and stone and only wide enough for them to move in single-file, the steep steps were worn slick from what must have been centuries of use. Without a bannister, Harry was keeping his wand out and an *Arresto Momentum* ready on his lips.

As a group, it seemed everyone was decidedly not thinking about the Imperiused dead who littered the floors above.

“We can hate ourselves as much as we want after we get out of here alive,” Mad-Eye had said.

But there had been tangible relief when Mad-Eye had told the non-Order Aurors to use their Pins to Portkey any survivors to St. Mungo’s.

*He’s probably just paranoid those Aurors are compromised, but at least some innocents may make it out of this.*

“Well, this isn’t creepy and disturbing *at all*, is it, Squibbulus?” Sirius quipped, though a tremor of anxiety laced through his words.

“No worse than the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack,” he shot back weakly. “I actually miss the lifts.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard you like a good shaft, yeah?”

Harry turned to see Sirius raising his eyebrows suggestively. “That’s seriously the best bent joke you could come up with? I’m a little disappointed in you, you berk.”

“My wit buckles under pressure and extreme emotional upset.”

Ahead of them, James huffed. “I just don’t get how you *know* about things like the Shrieking Shack, Aberforth. Bloody annoying, it is.”

Lily and Alice giggled nervously.
“Belt up, you runts,” came Moody’s irritated whisper from the front of the group. “We aren’t far off.”

With great relief they reached the bottom. They stood in an open clearing of a massive, dimly-lit cavern filled from earthen floor to towering ceiling with long rows of shelves stuffed with boxes, crates, file cabinets, and row after row of bound parchment.

“What is this place?” Lily murmured in awe.

“Records, old evidence storage, basically everything the Ministry can’t throw away but doesn’t need around much,” Alice whispered back. “ Goes back centuries. They can’t shrink any of it because the charms aren’t eternal.” She shook her head. “If we need an old file, we have to send someone down. Worst job in the Ministry, really.”

“Right, enough chatter.” Moody surveyed the eight people around him. “Place is too big for a revealing spell to show anything, so we do the legwork. Potter, Evans, you’re still with me. Ogden, Nash, Dedalus, you three are a team now, head right. Aberforth, you go with Black and Longbottom to the left. My team takes the center. Anyone sees anything suspicious, you let the other team captains know.”

Once again Harry found himself in the middle position as Sirius took point and Alice stationed herself as rear-guard.

Seeing her pale, still tear-stained face, he blurted, “I’m sure Frank will be okay, Alice.”

Her smile was more a grimace, but her words were sincere. “Yeah. Yeah, thanks, Harry.”

xoxoxox


They walked past countless rows housing the detritus of bureaucracy, all neatly collated, labelled, categorised, stacked, and eventually forgotten.

“The records go back to way before there even was a Ministry,” Alice whispered. “They just moved all of it from the first Ministry building on the Bridge when this one was built. Hell, they go back to before even Merlin, if you believe what some folks say.”

Harry could believe it.

They walked on.

Nervous tension radiated off Sirius ahead of him. The man was rolling his wand in his palm and breathing in annoyed little huffs.

“There’s no one here,” he finally burst out and turned to look at Harry and Alice.

“We have our orders,” the young Auror replied firmly. “Keep to them. I don’t know if—”

Bursts of light suddenly flashed far back from the direction they had come. But for Harry, who was still facing Sirius ahead of him, the light of a particularly bright blue spell illuminated a shape dozens of metres ahead of them, a human shape disappearing down one of the aisles.

“This way!” he hissed, and barreled ahead as Sirius gaped and Alice sputtered for him to stop.
Grabbing his Auror Pin, he screamed his thought. “Alice—at least one person up ahead, let’s move!”

As he ran he barely caught the sound of their muffled footsteps behind him.

*Which row was it, which row was it?*

*Here!*

He skidded to a stop so quickly that Alice and Sirius ran into him, but thankfully stayed silent. “Down this next row, I’m sure of it,” he thought to her as he grasped his Pin.

Alice nodded and cast Disillusionment spells on both herself and Harry. “Sirius,” she hissed quietly. “Guard our backs.”

As one Harry and Alice peered down the aisle.

Three cloaked and masked Death Eaters surrounded a fourth, petite figure who was opening a small casket on one of the shelves. A faint golden light began to glow as she raised the lid. Alice let out a nearly-silent gasp.

He moved to take a step into the row but she caught his arm and dragged him away.


*Well shite.*

He grasped his pin. “Well she’s either with them or she’s been captured! Why aren’t we going—”

“Look at the floor! It’s a classified section—highly restricted!”

A series of strange marks at the threshold to the aisle glowed a faint, fluorescent blue.

“That’s a fatal rune line, Harry! We can’t go down there without access.”

He cursed under his breath and the two of them moved to look down the aisle again, carefully keeping their feet behind the shining marks.

The woman—Bagnold—lifted something out of the casket and handed it to one of the Death Eaters.

“Excellent,” the man purred in a somewhat familiar voice as he handed whatever it was to one of his companions.

Harry stared at the trio of Death Eaters. The other man could have been anyone, but the third, the one who had taken the object, had long dark curls spilling out from under her mask.

*That’s the Lestrange woman. Sirius’ cousin.*

The group turned and began filing down the aisle toward them. Alice and Harry retreated a few steps back to Sirius, who jumped bodily when an invisible hand touched his shoulder.

“Three Death Eaters and the sodding Minister for Magic incoming!” Alice whispered as they dropped their Disillusionment charms.

Together they moved quickly to the entrance of another, unrestricted aisle some metres down and waited for the Death Eaters to pass, hearts pounding.
Yeah. Let them go by and we’ll hit them from behind.

It was a good plan, but they hadn’t considered that the Death Eaters had achieved their objective. The moment they exited the classified area, a muttered curse and a streak of green light bled through into their aisle. “What the—?” Alice gasped.

“Just leave the good Minister here, Travers,” the leader said in a cultured voice. “Her part in this is over.”

The woman laughed.

A feral expression darkened Sirius’ face and he made to rush back into the main walkway.

“No!” Harry whispered harshly, holding the man back from running straight into their enemies. “Let them pass, dammit!”

Alice’s voice broke into his mind. “I’ve told Moody, but he and the others have run into Death Eaters as well. We need to stop these ones and help them!”

Three sets of feet walked briskly by, and he, Alice, and Sirius burst from their perch. Alice’s *Confringo* might not have killed the Death Eater bringing up the rear, but Harry’s *Diffindo*, which seared through the man’s torso leaving him in two pieces, certainly did.

The leader swore and set off at a run down the walkway towards the stairs as the Lestrange woman blocked the crackling spell that Sirius shot at her.

“Cousin! Fancy meeting you here,” she giggled and cast the same lava-floor spell she’d used on Harry at the Dursleys.

Harry’s water spout burst into life, but proved unnecessary.

With a swish of his wand Sirius hardened the molten floor into a gleaming, brittle obsidian. “Oh come on, Bella,” he taunted. “You don’t think Father taught me that one as well?”

But the woman wasn’t looking at Sirius. Dark, cold eyes widened as they focused on Harry.

Sirius was already firing at the distracted woman again, and Harry took the opportunity to send another cutting curse at her throat.

She raised a shield as if swatting away a fly.

_Bitch is fucking fast_, Harry reminded himself.

“You!” she hissed at him, her eyes never leaving him. “I remember you…” A disturbingly cheerful grin stretched across her face. “But while I’d love to stay and chat, I’ve places to be.” Her wand shot out a flaming orb.

They all raised shields to block, but the fireball flew over them and slammed with a teeth-shaking pulse into one of the shelves several metres back.

Within seconds it was consumed in a writhing, hissing fire which rapidly multiplied and began devouring other aisles. Lestrange took her opening and ran after the other Death Eater.

“Conflagration Bomb!” Alice shrieked. “Fuck! I can stop this, but it takes time! You two, follow her! Help the others. I’ve got to make sure it doesn’t spread.”
Sirius was gone and running headlong after his cousin before Harry could blink.

He stared at the spreading mass of flames that were beginning to surge through the aisles. “You sure?”

Alice was already casting spells. “We’re trained for this shit, and you have your orders, Aberforth!”

“Aye-aye, Alice” he murmured.

xoxoxox

Harry bolted after Sirius, but his adrenaline had long since run its course. Fatigue washed over and through him, a deep weariness for all this shit.

*Let’s just get this fucking done, already.*

His battles with the Nines were over in minutes. Fights with pirates could go on for longer, but in those there usually had been a sense of light-heartedness, even fun, since wizarding marauders rarely engaged in true life-or-death combat.

*Stop whinging. Keep running. Finish the fight.*

Moody’s voice suddenly roared in his mind. “Anyone still alive on Eleven, we need back-up by the entrance now!”

*Lily. James.*

He forced more energy into his pumping legs.

*Job’s not done yet.*

xoxoxox

The flash of spellfire ahead at least confirmed that people were still alive, still fighting.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

Moody, James, Lily, Sirius, and the guy named Dedalus were barely holding on against more than double the number of Death Eaters.

Curses and hexes wheeled and whirled in a dizzying chaos of colour and sound, leaving the scents of ozone and vanilla, rancid meat and petrichor in their wake.

*Well, get in there, lad!* Ab’s voice prompted.

Harry got in there.

Unlike the battle on Level Ten, his opponents were in their right minds, defended themselves, and fought back with brutal resolve.

*Curse – Duck – Shield – Curse – Duck –*

There was no time for thought, no time for strategy.

*This isn’t dueling. It’s surviving.*

*Duck – Curse – Shield – Curse – Duck –*
When a screaming Lily went down to a Crucius, Harry was too numb to do anything but re-aim his next curse at her attacker as James threw himself with renewed vigor into the battle.

Harry turned towards two hulking opponents whose spells were crude but powerful and caught sight of Sirius still dueling with his cousin. *Good luck, Sirius. She’s fast.*

To his right Moody shot spell-chain after spell-chain at three others, even though one of his legs was half-blown off and bleeding profusely.

*We’re losing.*

*Shield – Duck – Shield – Curse – Curse –*

The Death Eaters were slowly maneuvering so that they were between the Order and the staircase.

*We can’t keep this up.*

*Curse – Curse – Shit, hit – Shield – just grazed – Curse –*

Alice ran up, her face black with soot, and joined the battle next to him.

*It’s not enough. They aren’t taking us out completely, but we can’t finish them.*

A horrible, aching misery clawed its way into him, a consuming sadness that started to eat away at his reserves.

*We’re…we’re all going to die down here.*

The weight of his despair fell heavy upon him.

*We should have run.*

A chorus began to play in a torturous loop.

– *Take Harry and run!* –

– *Please no, take me* –

– *Get up, Ab. Please?* –

– *I really can’t do anything for Myrtle, can I?* –

– *Stand aside, you silly girl!* –

– *Please, get up, Ab! Please!* –

– *Take Harry and run!* –

– *I thought I could love a liar* –

– *Get up, Ab. Please?* –

Harry swayed, desperately trying to keep his mind on the battle.

*Dementors. Dementors are here.*

He cast his blurry eyes around and noted with fleeting satisfaction that the Death Eaters seemed just
as affected as the Order members. Half of both groups were on their knees, cradling their heads, while the other half teetered and swayed.

But like the Battle at Gringotts, the Dementors remained unseen.

– Get up, Ab. Please? –

If I could just cast a patronus…

– I thought I could love a liar –

…I could end this right now.

Through the haze in his mind he spied Moody trying to staunch his bleeding leg and cast a patronus at the same time. Silver vapor forced itself from his wand before dissipating into nothingness. The veteran Auror slumped into the growing pool of blood beneath him.

Happy thoughts…

But the misery was too thick, and behind it, beyond it, was a terrible, mounting pressure that made his lungs hurt and his eyes feel like they were bulging out of his skull.

This is beyond me.

It took all he had not to fall to his knees like so many of the others, his brain filling with leaden misery that drowned him in all the worst moments of his life.

He was so lost in the excruciating weight of it all that he didn’t notice at first when a tall, rail-thin figure approached down the long central hallway, gliding faster than was humanly possible over the earthen floor.

Wait.

– Ab? Please Ab? –

– Take Harry and run! –

Wait…That’s fucking Voldemort.

Pure shock kept the chorus of agony at bay long enough for him to stare at the Dark Lord. As he had been at Gringotts, Voldemort was swathed in a black robe so dark it felt like the absolute absence of colour. A hood covered most of his face, but Harry could see his eyes.

He blinked.

They aren’t red.

Eyes a blue so pale they shone almost white cut through the dark even before the hood dropped back a bit. The man’s mouth cracked into a lurid approximation of a smile.

What the hell is wrong with him? Terror bit into Harry far more acutely than misery. Jesus, fuck, what’s wrong with his mouth?

It was as if a blind man had ripped off Voldemort’s lips and tried to stitch them back on. Puffy and misshapen, they had blackened and purpled like necrotic skin, his smile more a gash that cut across his face.
Lucius’ Malfoy’s words from a few months back echoed in Harry’s mind.

...I fear we have thrown our lots in with a monster...

But his shock was wearing off and the desolation of the Dementors was waxing yet again.

The Dark Lord’s smile grew wider.

*Dear God, what has he done? What has he done?*

“Ah, my faithful,” he whispered in a high voice that felt like fingernails scratching across a blackboard. “My apologies. I know the effects can be…debilitating for weaker minds.” The Dark Lord flicked his yew wand and the Death Eaters around him started shuffling back to their feet.

Fuck.

*Wherever the Dementors are, he stopped their effects. But only for them.*

Crushing despair and voices from the past bore down on him again even as he screamed for his mind to *shake it the fuck off.*

From behind him there suddenly came another voice, one he hadn’t realized that he’d been longing to hear.

“You shouldn’t have come here tonight, Tom.”

Pure white light filled the foyer of Level Eleven. Harry’s despair ebbed away as he glanced up to see a massive phoenix patronus hovering above them all.

“Ah, Albus! My Death Eaters found dear Millicent, but the night is incomplete without you.”

Dumbledore brushed a step past Harry, his eyes on Tom alone. “I know what you are doing, Tom. I will not let it happen.”

Voldemort laughed.

Harry’s skin crawled at the unnatural sound. An Order member whimpered.

“Perhaps. Perhaps you are deluding yourself. In either case, you cannot maintain a patronus and fight me at the same time, can you Albus? Will you really sacrifice your people to try your wand against mine?”

When Dumbledore said nothing, Harry’s stomach dropped. *Shit. He’s right and Albus knows it.* He looked around. The Order and Dumbledore stood between Voldemort and his Death Eaters, several of whom had used the distraction to edge closer to the stairs.

Voldemort fingered his wand with exaggerated nonchalance.

*It’s a standoff. Dumbledore can’t do this alone.*

His mind raced under the aegis of the headmaster’s patronus.

*I have to help him.*

...
And I do know something Voldemort doesn’t know.

Oh hell…

…

God, I really am a bloody ridiculous fool.

Best kind of fool to be, I reckon, Ab’s voice whispered back.

Harry sighed.

Time to poke a Dark Lord with a stick.

He squared his shoulders, stepped up next to Dumbledore, and faced the Dark Lord of this world for the first time.

“Christ, Riddle,” he began with a shake of his head. “What the fuck have you done to yourself? Didn’t you use to be pretty?”

The Death Eaters gasped and Dumbledore’s eyes widened, but Harry kept his eyes on the man in front of him.

Voldemort stilled, shifting his pale eyes away from the headmaster. “What…what did you call me?”

Harry frowned. “Riddle. Y’know, Tom Marvolo Riddle? Your name?” He forced himself to laugh. “I mean your real name. What people called you before you decided it wasn’t really the height of evil-Dark-Lordiness or whatever.”

Behind him, Sirius let out a hysterical giggle. “Merlin, he has a death wish,” he muttered in terrified admiration.

“Lies!” the Dark Lord snarled.

Harry just shrugged. “Whatever you say, Tom.”

Voldemort looked like he wanted to rip him apart with curses, but a moment later his expression settled into calm disdain. “So you think yourself their great defender? A schoolboy?”

“Actually, I think I’m technically a dropout.”

Did I seriously just say that to fucking Voldemort?

The Dark Lord seemed to have the same thought and considered him for a long moment, his mouth chewing at his rotting lips in a way that made Harry’s stomach churn. “And who might you be, then?”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Dumbledore stiffen. A childish voice in his mind snapped petulantly, I told you I wasn’t his kid, Albus!

“No one important.”

“He’s the one I told you of, Master!” the Lestrange woman’s voice cut in. “The one at the house! His face is different but I’m sure—!”

“Really? How fascinating. If that’s so, I owe you quite a bit of pain for the difficulties you’ve caused
me, boy.” Harry watched as Voldemort rolled his wand in his fingers again. *He does that. I saw him do that in the graveyard before the duel as well.*

*Not long now.*

*Please let this work.*

On impulse, he sneaked a hand to his Auror Pin. *“Dumbledore? Can you hear me?”*

*“Harry? My God, what are you do—”*

*“Sir, the second he casts at me, you need to back up, far as you can, and get the others out of the way.”*

*“Harry, I—”*

*“But,” Voldemort sighed in mock regret. “I’m afraid I haven’t the time.”*

*“Trust me Albus! Just this once. Please!”*

Harry watched as Voldemort raised his wand, his every muscle taut, waiting for the exact right time.

*“…I trust you, Harry.”*

Voldemort smiled.

*“Avada Kedavra!”*

The moment the Dark Lord started to form the words, Harry leapt to action. *“Expelliarmus!”*

Of course, he could have used a different spell, a better spell, but he wasn’t absolutely sure if that wouldn’t have a different effect.

*And it’s not like I actually want to hit him.*

As the two spells raced towards each other, he sensed more than saw Dumbledore release his patronus, whip his wand around, and send himself and the nearby Order members out of the way.

It was with a horribly discordant sound, like a great broken bell tolling its last, that the two spells collided mid-air and tethered Harry’s wand to Voldemort’s with a shrieking blast of silver light that glinted like razor blades.

Both men clung to their wands as a darker silver glow ignited in the center of the beam, much like the golden focus of power had once appeared in a graveyard on another world.

Riddle’s face was contorted in a rictus of shock.

Harry didn’t feel much better.

The golden dome he had expected was instead a whirling, cutting hurricane of sharp silver that screamed like a buzz-saw slicing through metal around them. It hacked into his mind, whining, buzzing, screeching.

*This…Is this what insanity sounds like?*

He suspected people were shouting or crying on the other side of the maddened storm, even though
he could feel the effects of Dumbledore’s renewed patronus glowing serenely around the edges of his soul.

“What is this magic?” Voldemort shouted into the din, for the first time looking anything other than confident.

*I think this is what happens when brother wands from different universes are forced to battle,* Harry thought fleetingly.

*It’s the sound of something that’s not ever supposed to be.*

As the dark silver orb edged towards him on the beam of magical energy, Harry dug into himself to push it back towards the Dark Lord.

He didn’t intend to force it to impact the man’s wand like it had last time, but he’d be damned if he’d let Voldemort think him weak.

*Though my plan was based on it being like last time.*

*Maybe I really don’t want to let that orb hit me…*

With a mental shake of his head he dug down deeper. *It’s the best plan I have and I’m committed now.*

Slowly, slowly, he lessened the strength of his desire to *not let the silver orb get near him,* and Riddle’s eyes glinted as he pushed it closer to Harry.

When it was only six inches from the tip of his holly wand, Harry reached into his robes with his free left hand and met Voldemort’s exultant gaze.

*Because of you,* he thought, *decent people like Will and Nappy die.*

His hand closed around Will’s wand. It flared with a strange, prickle of heat that gradually grew stronger.

This didn’t feel like acceptance, like the warmth of his holly wand always had.

This…

This felt like *alliance.*

*Please help me.*

Three inches.

*I hate him. I hate what he does. I hate how he ruins every life he touches.*

Two inches.

*I hate that he makes me hate. I hate that because of him I lost my world.*

One inch.

*I hate that because of him I lost my parents. That I lost Ab.*

Before the sizzling silver glow could reach the tip of his holly wand, he tore Will’s wand from his
robes and looked Voldemort full in the face.

Yes. I hate him.

Harry tasted the blood on his teeth. “Avada Kedavra!”

It was a good shot, a powerful electric green, and he knew in his soul that it would hit.

So he could still smile even as the silver glow reached him, as his beloved wand shuddered and dissolved into ash.

He could smile even as an agonizing pulse of horrible wrongness raced up his arm, because he saw his Killing Curse slam into the Dark Lord and send him flying back in a limp heap.

Meat hit stone.

The sound was like music.

He’s dead. It’s over.

Harry dropped to his knees.

I killed Voldemort.

Harry smiled while his body, his mind, his everything sagged.

It doesn’t matter.

He’s dead.

It’s over.

If he’d had the energy, he would have cried.

It’s okay.

It’s really okay.

Thank you. Thank you.

... 

And then Voldemort stood up.

... 

The world snagged to a stop.

... 

No.

The man swayed but managed to steady himself.

No, I hit him. I know I did.

Riddle laughed.
Horror coursed through Harry as he watched the Dark Lord, a perverted sort of adrenaline that left him limp-limbed and wide-eyed.

“Impressive, boy,” Voldemort sniffed, adjusting his robes. “But you cannot presume to kill one such as I. I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.”

“No,” he whispered dumbly.

Voldemort’s gash of a mouth split into a Cheshire grin. “Yes.”

The word was little more than a hiss, but it seemed to burn through Harry’s flesh.

“And now you are gifted with the honour of helping me make history. I have been labouring to tame this magic for quite some time now, but you will be the first to taste it.” He gave Harry a mocking little bow of his head. “You are welcome, boy.”

He wanted to move, to stand, to do something, but his body was just too exhausted.

“What—what are you—?”

The Dark Lord brandished his wand, muttering an incantation Harry couldn’t hear. A bone-deep wrongness seemed to bend and warp reality between them, and he knew he couldn’t avoid this, couldn’t duck away, couldn’t—

what is – dear god what – ohgodohgodohgo –

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is a play on Hunter S. Thompson’s infamous novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, ©1972, though the action of this chapter obviously has nothing to do with that story.

**On Level Eleven:** There is no Level Eleven in the canon Ministry according to its directory. However, I’ve had to spend a fair bit of time professionally in official buildings of various governments, and it nearly always holds true that the storage basements and sub-basements aren’t listed on directories. So I took a liberty.

**Huge thanks to the wonderful volunteers who pre-read this chapter:** Christina, CrowManifesto, Jadejabberwock, and Shadowstouch! I really appreciate your help. (If I mixed up your ao3 handle and your google handle, please let me know so I can fix it. I’m easily confused).

Both my beta AvergaeFish and I have been really busy, so this chapter has not been beta read. My apologies for any mistakes. We’ll be going through it together in the future and will tighten everything up.

**Next on The Second String:** It’s a changed world filled with answers, questions, and suspicions in Chapter 33, “A Generation Lost in Space,” the final chapter of
Arc III.
A Generation Lost in Space

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XXXIII. A Generation Lost in Space

A series of vignettes from the summer of 1979, as told from the perspectives of Caradoc Dearborn, Albus Dumbledore, Fabian Prewett, Alice Longbottom, and Lily Evans.

15 June, 1979
(two weeks after the Ministry Invasion)

It was a Friday night and the Head was too quiet, even though their normal crowd was all present and accounted for.

Doc frowned as he refilled a beer for what-his-face-with-the-missing-ear.

Every night’s been too quiet lately.

Guin bustled in, belly truly beginning to swell now and hair messier than usual. She set a bowl of stew in front of Dalcop, who obliged her by picking up a spoon.

Dalcop put the spoon back down on the bar the moment she left.

Doc looked away.

After delivering a few pints to the-bloke-who-got-fired-from-the-Prophet and old-Scottish-bastards-numbers-three-and-four (Doc was the first to admit he was never much good with most names), he lumbered back to the bar, massaging his aching stump.

“Going to storm, then, you reckon?” Pel asked with a pointed look at his missing arm.

“Probably. Hurts more when something’s about to roll in.”

Neither could think of anything else to say.

Eventually Guin returned with a tray of sandwiches for Loch and his boys. As she hurried past the bar, Doc caught Pel and Marty Sorner watching her closely.

“I know it ain’t my business, Doc,” Marty started, “but Guin’s been looking—” He cut himself off as she headed back their way.

Yeah, she’s been looking too pale and too tired. I know, Marty.

He cleared his throat. “Love, why don’t you have a bit of a sit-down? I can handle this. You’ve been running yourself ragged.”

The brunette fixed fierce blue eyes on her husband, who instinctively took a step back. “You hush,
Caradoc Dearborn! I’m hardly some delicate flower.” She glared at the barflies in turn, though her glance at Dalcop was far gentler. “And you lot! Don’t you be playing mother hen to me! We’ve got a pub to run here. When Harry gets back, well, then I’ll have ‘a bit of a sit-down,’ you all hear me?”

She sent them a final, disgusted look and stalked back to the kitchen.

The men shared a glance and went back to drinking. Doc busied himself drying pint glasses with a towel. He could have charmed them dry and it was damned hard with one arm, but neither Harry nor Guin liked the spots the spells left on the glass.

“Any, uh, any word on Harry, then?” Marty finally asked.

The one-armed man swallowed the lump in his throat. “No. They’re…well they’re moving him tomorrow, actually.”

He had to look away when he saw their faces—all but Pel’s, that was—brighten.

“Yeah. St. Mungo’s said that there isn’t anything more they can do and some rot about that wing being too full already. Hasn’t gotten worse, like they expected, but he hasn’t gotten any better. Me and Guin offered to care for him here, of course, and Hagrid wanted him at his cottage…” Doc shook his head, trying not to notice that the mood had turned gloomy once again. “Though honestly, neither us—nor Hagrid—can really take care of him like he deserves.”

For the first time in what felt like forever, Dalcop spoke up. “So what’s gonna happen to him, then?”

Pel cleared his throat. “Dumbledore offered Hogwarts. Lad’s always been close to the matron there, and she has the training for the job.”

*And Harry apparently pissed off the Dark Lord something rotten. Most places aren’t safe for him anyway.* Doc sighed.

“But,” Loch spoke up from a nearby table, “he isn’t a student. Plus with the Ministry…Is he even allowed to stay at Hogwarts, even if he’s…well, you know?”

The old solicitor’s laugh was brittle. “S’not like there’s many to stand in Albus Dumbledore’s way at this point. Plus, he made the point that Ab was essentially Harry’s adoptive father, so that makes him his closest living family. Codswallop, of course, but I certainly wasn’t going to call him on it. Hogwarts is the best place for Harry right now.”

“They any closer to figuring out what he was hit with?” another regular asked.

“Don’t think so. Just that it was dark.”

One of the vampires in Sanguini’s group came up for another bottle of bloodwine. “Hope he gets better,” he murmured. “I like that boy.”

Doc nodded and thanked blond-vampire-who-didn’t-wear-puffed-sleeves. He’d been hearing variations on that same sentiment for days now.

*I never really noticed just how much people have taken to him.*

If he were honest, he hadn’t really noticed how much *he’d* taken to Harry. Sure, he’d always liked the kid well enough—the boy’d saved his skin, after all, if not his arm. But Doc was a *Gryffindor*. Liars didn’t sit well with him, and Harry had always been too mysterious by half.
Guin had a soft spot for the kid though, and then Harry had up and offered them a place at the Head even though he barely knew them.

Had acted as their partner when he could have claimed the title of boss easily enough.

Doc hadn’t really noticed when a shared job became a shared table, when a shared table became shared lives.

Another semi-regular came up to order a pint. “Hope Harry gets better. Ain’t the same around here without him.”

*Yeah. It surely ain’t.*

---

**22 June, 1979**  
*(three weeks after the Ministry Invasion)*

Albus Dumbledore signed yet another set of parchments, placed them in his “Completed” pile, and promptly realized he hadn’t read a word of them.

*Hopefully I didn’t just sign Britain away to the French,* he thought with a smile.

A moment later he was frantically rifling through the file to ensure that he had *not*, in fact, signed wizarding Britain away to the French.

The portrait of Brian Gagwilde that hung to the left of his desk grinned. “Just declare war on Bulgaria there, Albus?”

Some of the other portraits laughed.

“Atalas, nothing so exciting, Brian. I simply approved an increase in foodstuffs for the Hogwarts stores.”

“Pity that. A few captured veela would liven the place up!”

Albus gave the man a tolerant look. “I cannot share your dismay that we’re moving beyond the age of colonialism, my old friend.”

The portraits ignored him and settled into a robust debate on the ethics of capturing veela, a discussion he quickly tuned out. As nearly all of the previous headmasters and headmistresses pre-dated the twentieth century—most the Enlightenment—their views hardly stood up to modern sensibilities.

Instead he sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. His life since the Ministry Invasion had been… trying.

*I suspect Aberforth would have opted for a more colourful adjective*

‘Buggered all to shit and back’ *seems a particularly apropos.*

A now-familiar wave of helplessness rolled over him.

The horror of the Imperiused innocents had shattered them all with a shared guilt, but it was the complete and utter disappearance of the Ministry of Magic that had thrown all of wizarding Britain into a spiral of panic and denial.
MINISTRY LOSES MINISTRY! the Prophet screamed the day after the Invasion, and for once Albus couldn’t fault them.

They had, after all, quite literally lost the Ministry.

Even now, determined witches and wizards continued to Apparate to Great Scotland Yard near Whitehall, searching in vain for the Visitors’ Entrance to the building.

No one appreciates history, and this is the result.

Albus had explained it multiple times to the Prophet, but it was only Miss Turtlecap at Witch Weekly who seemed to have a brain in her head. Filius did always rave about her essays.

Several copies of her article were kept on his desk to save time with more obtuse bureaucrats, though he didn’t need to read it again to know what it said.

Voldemort hadn’t attacked to gain control of the Ministry.

He’d attacked in order to eradicate it.

All this death because of a damn trinket.

“Wizards’ memories are as short as our lives are long,” he murmured to Fawkes.

Albus had forgotten more wizarding history than most would ever know. Even he, however, had never spared a thought for the golden Seal of the Minister. Indeed, he was only vaguely aware of the bauble’s existence as an old ceremonial symbol of the Minister’s authority, and its location somewhere in the Ministry’s secure storage.

Not secure enough.

It wasn’t until the morning after the Invasion that Alice Longbottom’s description of the theft she’d witnessed on Eleven had triggered his memory.

His dusty copy of Historical Procedures and Policies of the Ministry of Magic had been brutal in its clarity that morning.

Albus knew well enough that ancient magics permeated the Ministry, charms and enchantments designed to guarantee its stability and, more importantly, its security.

But, he’d discovered as he read, those same magics laced through that damnable trinket, the Minister’s Seal. Should it ever be removed from the Minister’s possession and the Ministry itself without authorisation, the Ministry would be forced into an absolute lockdown.

Only a legitimate, elected Minister in possession of the Seal could enter and cancel the stasis.

Apparently the earliest Ministry believed it better that no one should have its power rather than the wrong person.

Idiots.

Dumbledore rubbed his eyes.

No.

It is our fault.
It didn’t matter that the Seal hadn’t been seen in public for more than two centuries.

*We should have protected it better. Protected Bagnold better.*

*We should never have allowed ourselves to forget.*

He scratched a reminder to himself to have Binns replaced before the next term.

*And what we forgot, Tom remembered.*

With a crushing blow reliant on long-forgotten historical minutiae, Tom had crippled his opposition in a way none ever expected.

*We cannot even maintain the fiction of security now.*

Another wave of helplessness washed over him, the tang of guilt like salt on his tongue.

*And if I had remembered what the Seal meant, we could have avoided our last, terrible mistake.*

As soon as the battle on Eleven was over, Albus had given the word for all Order members to evacuate and transport their wounded to Saint Mungo’s.

Of course, with the Seal gone, no one could return once they had left.

Thankfully, Minerva and the Prewetts had each Side-Alonged an initial round of prisoners when they departed, and the Aurors who survived Level Ten had left with injured Imperius-victims as well.

In all, only nine of the Imperiused were rescued.

*Nine out of more than a hundred.*

He could admit to himself, if no one else, that he desperately hoped any of the surviving innocents who remained had died quickly, never having regained consciousness to find themselves abandoned.

*The Ministry is surely now nothing more than a tomb.*

With a guttering sigh he surveyed the stacks upon stacks of parchment on his desk, a veritable forest of Order reports, Hogwarts business, and Ministry memos.

“*Only a fool tries to juggle every ball and thinks he’ll never drop them,“* his mother used to smile whenever a young Albus lamented he’d taken on too many extracurricular responsibilities.

Of course, he’d never bowed out of a single commitment, being so very sure of his own capabilities.

*And now I have dropped nearly all which I was juggling.*

Headmaster. Chief Warlock. General.

The Invasion had drummed into him the impossibility of playing all his roles well.

He’d raced through the allegedly ‘secure’ executive offices, hoping and failing to find survivors, and then finally run for the lifts to join his Order in the battles below.

And then Filius’ panther patronus had forced him to make a choice.

“*At least a dozen Death Eaters attacking the school!*”
Albus was still certain it was only meant as a diversion to draw him away—a dozen Death Eaters could hardly penetrate the protections on Hogwarts.

But.

That night dismay had warred with reluctant pride in his prodigal student. Only the Headmaster or his Deputy could activate Hogwarts’ advanced protections, and Minerva had long since been engaged to ensure the operation of the lifts.

And so he’d chosen the sleeping children of magical Britain over the men and women fighting on the floors below.

Well played, Tom.

His return to the school was a haze of necessity, a storm of exhausting charms and hurried conversations. But he could only depart when he was certain that no Death Eater would breach her walls.

Then finally he had returned to the Ministry, hoping desperately that his forces had not been slaughtered in his absence.

And honestly, though many—too many—had been lost that night, it had ended better than Albus had truly expected.

And now to pick up the pieces and try to put a nation back together.

He glared at the towering pile of parchments in his ‘To be Completed’ tray.

A fine bloody mess this is.

... 

His reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Minerva McGonagall and Lily Evans.

“Oh Albus, we must do something about the space issue!” his Deputy burst in without preamble. “The children came to the Great Hall for lunch but Barty is briefing the remaining Aurors and barred the doors! He called it a ‘necessary security precaution.’ The upper years are ready to revolt!”

“And we can’t allow the Muggle Artefacts Office to continue using the Muggle Studies classroom. Every time the professor tries to teach, Arthur interrupts to correct her and then the whole thing becomes a row,” Lily added.

Albus forced his face into a smile. “We cannot deny our students their lunches or their educations. Make me a list of the complaints and I’ll speak to the relevant parties. For now, have food delivered to the Common Rooms and instruct the prefects to lead their Houses there for lunch.”

Minerva left to handle the lunch debacle while Lily Evans sat down by the fire to work on the list.

I could not manage this miserable menagerie without them.

Indeed, he felt like nothing so much as a zookeeper at this point. Since the Ministry building was unavailable, the wizarding government had been transferred to the only more secure location in Britain: Hogwarts.

Teenagers, politicians, and career bureaucrats all living happily together.
Albus cast a speculative look at the young Miss Evans.

*Not happily. Hardly happily.*

Like everyone involved, she had been pale and careworn since the Ministry Invasion.

*But she is alive, even if she is not quite who she once was.*

He wasn’t blind to the effects that killing so many innocents had on those in his Order. Some, like James Potter, focused their rage outwardly at the enemy. Others, like Alice Longbottom, seemed to bury the horror within themselves.

Alastor still hadn’t said a word since waking from his healing sleep the week before.

Albus made a note to have Remus Lupin keep an eye on Sirius Black. The poor boy had been drinking far more Firewhisky than was advisable.

*War makes beasts out of men, and the children suffer.*

He’d first heard the saying during the conflict with Gellert, and had wholeheartedly believed it these many years. But watching the warriors in his Order, most really still children themselves, he felt the original rather incomplete.

*War makes beasts out of men, and the children suffer to become men themselves.*

Fawkes opened and eye and squawked. ‘*Enough of long thoughts and long words, old man,* he seemed to say. ‘*Your job isn’t done yet.*’

*Quite right.*

With a quick word to Miss Evans, he walked over to his pensieve and once again lowered his face into the memory of the confrontation with Tom.

xoxoxox

Following his memory-self into the clearing on Level Eleven, Albus reaffirmed that it was a true miracle any of the Order survived the night.

The relieved looks on the Order’s faces at his arrival shone in the spell-light.

And there was a his phoenix patronus, gleaming in the midst of carnage.

Albus sighed as he saw beads of sweat forming on his Memory-self’s face.

*Yes, I was faltering. Had it not been for Harry’s…unexpected contribution, we would not have survived.*

His frown deepened as he viewed the boy’s battle with Tom. The entire thing left him as flummoxed now as it had the first dozen times he watched the memory.

There was the moment their wands connected in some horrifying and unfamiliar fashion. The silver whirlwind that surrounded them still obscured much of his view, though through the chaos he spied a smouldering focus of energy moving between them.

*Yes, perhaps I was right earlier. Some perversion of the brother wand effect—*
But no, Fawkes has only ever given the one feather…

Above the screeching of the barrier, Albus once again heard the boy’s triumphant Killing Curse, glimpsed a flash of green streaking through the silver.

With practiced ease his mind slowed down the memory at the moment the barrier dropped. Watching Harry’s curse lift Tom off his feet, Albus swore under his breath.

None can dispute that the Killing Curse struck Voldemort.

He couldn’t find fault with the boy for casting it, despite his aversion to the spell. In war what society deemed unforgivable too often became unavoidable.

No, I may not like it, but I cannot condemn it.

As Tom stood up, Albus’ blood chilled with unnatural cold.

There had been no argument when he’d advised the Order to keep Voldemort’s ability to survive the curse a closely-guarded secret, known only to themselves and Barty Crouch as head of the DMLE.

It undoubtedly would cause mass hysteria. Half the wizarding world defect to the Death Eaters merely out of terror.

With a heavy heart he allowed the memory to return to normal speed, forcing himself to watch Tom retaliate with a spell so seeping with malignance that Albus wanted to shrink from even thinking about it.

Whatever the curse had been, Tom had not expected it to leave him severely weakened, that much was clear. As the Memory Alice Longbottom dragged Harry’s limp body out of the line of fire, Tom sagged to his knees, nearly dropping his wand.

Albus locked his gaze on moments he wished were fictions.

There he was, the great Albus Dumbledore, sending volley after volley of the most damaging spells known to the wizarding world at the vulnerable Dark Lord. He could still taste his desperate wish that they could have an effect even though the Killing Curse had not. At the time, he’d been under no illusion that Tom would not eventually neutralize all the curses and hexes, but Albus had hoped they would at least delay the man for a good long while.

It was a tactical choice made under extreme duress, and even now Albus could not disagree with his actions.

But.

But as he watched himself, he shuddered at the sheer malice of the curses he’d not hesitated to cast. From necrotizing hexes to curses that would randomly cause organ failure to charms that would fester unnoticed and cause paralyzing delusions, the spells Albus wielded were the very weapons wielded by those against whom they fought.

War makes beasts of men...

He paused the memory and studied the ferocious, almost feral, expression that sat all too comfortably on his own face.

...And I am no exception.
Looking away, Albus resumed the memory.

There was Mrs. Lestrange running to Tom’s aid, and there was Lily Potter trouncing Abraxas Malfoy—the only Death Eater the Order managed to capture and bring out of the Ministry.

_Not that the man was able to tell us anything we didn’t already know before we sent him to Azkaban, even with Veritaserum._

Seconds later, the Dark Lord and his minions retreated out of the building, followed by the Order and Albus with their injured and the Malfoy patriarch.

He sighed, feeling every day his age, and exited the pensieve.

xoxoxox

Lily was waiting for him upon his return.

“Sir? Here’s the list.”

“Ah, thank you, Miss Evans.” Moving back to his desk, he scanned the catalogue of complaints, becoming more fatigued with every line. “Well, all I can say is that I’m grateful term ends next week. Should the Ministry building remain inaccessible in September, I fear we shall have to become creative.”

The redhead smiled wearily and hesitated.

“Was there anything else, Miss Evans?”

Lily bit her lip and produced a small tray of what looked like raspberry tarts. “Yes sir. Um, it’s just that the Dearborns have been rather vocal about getting a permanent pass into the school. They’ve been coming quite often, and the new security protocols for non-students are a little...intrusive. Mrs. Dearborn sent you these as well.”

“Ah.” He eyed the tarts, attempting to conceal his enthusiasm. _Slytherins always do offer the most wonderful bribes._ “Yes, of course. I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you, sir.” She shuffled her feet nervously. “I, er—I mean, I was also wondering how Harry is doing.”

The tarts suddenly lost their appeal as Albus’ stomach soured.

“I’m afraid his condition remains unchanged.”

Her expression fell. A moment later she left him to his thoughts with a murmured courtesy.

The fate of Harry Aberforth was one Albus preferred not to think on, though his nightmares these past weeks refused to grant his wish.

_Dear Merlin, that spell._

The rest of the Order despaired over the curse, but Albus was the only one who knew enough to be truly and thoroughly horrified by it.

_I suppose if one lives long enough, he will indeed, as the saying goes, experience everything at least twice._
He had hoped never to repeat that particular experience.

Albus sighed again, his eyes drifting to a framed photograph that showed himself, a grinning twenty-something year old, accepting an award for his research achievements.

_The smile of an ambitious idiot_, he snorted.

As a young man he had always been a promising scholar, especially after his falling out with Gellert convinced him that he was better suited to the academy than to the political arena (ah, and _look at me now_, he frowned). Yes, it was pure research into the heart and mysteries of magic that had called to him, and in his youthful enthusiasm no subject had been taboo, so long as he kept his sense of morality firmly in place.

By the time he was nearing thirty, it was the paradox and potential of transfiguring the intangible that had set his imagination ablaze. Could one modify the principles of transfiguration to emotions, he would wonder, and thus cure such maladies as chronic melancholia? Might it heal those who, like Ariana, had been fundamentally damaged? Or could one perhaps ‘adjust’ the souls of the criminally insane, thereby restoring them to health?

_Maybe, _young Albus had thought in his hubristic naiveté, _the transfiguration of intangibles could heal the world._

So it was with genuine excitement that he had accepted the offer of the Ministry to be in attendance when Ameletus Kteino, a serial murderer, was administered the Dementor’s Kiss in 1912.

Albus had hoped that watching the procedure might shed light on the process of magically manipulating the soul.

The next day he burned his research.

A justifiable execution was one thing, but what he had seen…

It had taken Albus years to stop dreaming of the horror that had seemed to blanket his own skin as the Dementor latched onto Kteino’s mouth, years to wash the tang of a decaying, consumed soul from his nostrils.

_Souls_, young Albus discovered that day, _were sacred things, never to be meddled with._

Tom’s spell had inflicted upon those who witnessed Harry’s fall the same horror, the same smell, the same sense of profound _wrongness_ that no water could wash away.

“My God, Riddle, what have you done to yourself?”

The young man’s taunts echoed through the headmaster’s memories.

_What have you done indeed_?

The feel of the spell and its catastrophic effects all pointed to Tom somehow replicating the effects of the Dementor’s Kiss, and aligned with the second appearance in battle of the unseen Dementors.

_There were never Dementors in Gringotts’ Plaza, nor were there any in the Ministry. It was Tom, and whatever spells he has designed._

Albus slumped back in his chair, feeling his every decade.

_And Harry…_
Harry now seemed nothing more than a husk. Limp, helpless, and completely unresponsive.

*For all anyone can tell, he has received The Kiss.*

The only point of hope was that he still lived even after three weeks. No other victims had ever survived more than a few days without their souls.

St. Mungo’s Head Healer had informed him a week before that there was nothing to be done, and that the kindest course of action was to ‘end the young man’s suffering.’

Albus responded by having himself put down as the boy’s closest family and ensuring his transfer to Hogwarts.

*There are benefits to losing a functioning bureaucracy.*

No matter if Harry had his soul or not, no matter if he ever woke up or not, Dumbledore was adamant that the young man would stay safe and cared for in the Hospital Wing.

*Aberforth would demand no less.*

*And such a man deserves no less.*

Albus rubbed his eyes. It was time to return to his research, and hopefully divine what lines Tom had crossed.

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**1 July, 1979**  
*(one month after the Ministry Invasion)*

“Hey Gid, Alice Longbottom told me to tell you hello,” Fabian remarked as he entered the workshop.

“Hello,” Gideon replied flatly, eyes glued to his sketchbook.

The elder Prewett flopped into his favourite torn leather armchair. “Yeah, she came in for a clock for the Potter wedding, but I had to tell her that Evans already commissioned one for her groom. Poor thing is annoyed that now she has no idea what to get them.”

“What?”

“You’re going to be able to take time away from this project of yours to actually make the Potter clock, right? The wedding’s only a few weeks away.”

“’Course.”

Fabian nestled into the chair and studied his brother. Everyone in the Order had been upset since the Ministry Invasion, especially those who had been in the battles on the lower levels.

*Well, killing a bunch of innocent, mind-controlled folks will do that.*

He himself had been trying, relatively successfully, not to dwell on the number of people under the Imperius that he, Gideon, and Emmeline had killed or left for dead in the Atrium battle.

*We did our best, and we didn’t know. Only thing to do is not to do it again.*
Besides, even if we’d known, it wasn’t like we could do much of anything. They were still trying to kill us, and there were scores more of them. Not like you can just Finite away the bloody Imperius Curse.

Compartmentalization and rationalization had always been some of his stronger suits.

Gid...well, not so much.

All summer his brother had been even more taciturn than normal. Damn near exclusively monosyllabic at this point. The only thing that seemed to earn his attention was their—his—new project, a clock that could identify the presence of marked Death Eaters.

Honestly, Fabian doubted the possibility of such an invention, given that they didn’t really know anything about the Dark Mark and Crouch had refused to let them examine the captured Malfoy. But Gideon was a man on a mission.

Who knows, maybe he’ll come up with something.

And at least it’s a potentially lucrative distraction.

It wasn’t lost on him that Gideon’s new obsession likely had just as much to do with the condition of his ex-boyfriend as it did with guilt over killing innocents.

After they’d evacuated the Atrium and reconvened at Edgar Bones’ house that night, he hadn’t missed the way his brother froze when a hysterical Alice Longbottom and shell-shocked James Potter described the man’s insane duel with the Dark Lord.

And then at their next meeting, Dumbledore had announced that the Healers believed Harry to be beyond recovery. Gideon had stiffened again and said nothing, even when the headmaster suggested—rather too optimistically, in Fabian’s opinion—that he still had hope that the young bartender would prove the healers wrong.

His brother never mentioned Harry after that.

Not that he talked about him much after the breakup anyway.

Gid was like that, Fabian would shrug. He didn’t understand it, but then both his siblings had always said that he never had a thought which he didn’t think wasn’t worth sharing.

Watching his brother work, shoulders hunched, eyes dark and focused, Fabian managed to stop himself from saying what he thought for once.

Let’s try this another way.

“I told Alice she should try O’Keefe’s Curiosities over in Dublin or Talog’s Treasures in Cardiff. She said she would, but couldn’t today. Guess she was planning on stopping at the school to visit Harry this afternoon.”

Gideon’s hand stopped mid-sketch.

Gotcha.

“Not that there’s much point in it, I reckon. From what I’ve heard, there hasn’t been any improvement. But it’s sweet of her anyway.”

“Hmm.”
Fabian’s eyes bored into his little brother’s back. “He seem any better when you saw him?”

His brother tensed.

“Wouldn’t know. I haven’t visited.”

*My, my. An actual sentence. If this keeps up, he may even move on to direct objects. My turn, then.*

“Hmm,” he hummed.

That did it. Gideon turned in his chair and glared at him. “What? We broke up. Why should I visit him?”

“Because you still care about him, and however you feel about him lying, he was damn brave and probably saved a lot of lives. You should at least go and—”

“And what?” his brother exploded. “None of it matters now!” Gideon turned away and seemed to chew over his next words. “Evans told me…she told me that they have to use an adhesive charm on his eyelids. That when it wears off, they open automatically and he just lays there, staring.”

Gideon turned and started sketching runes again.

Fabian eventually his brother to his work, wondering if this was another example of him speaking when maybe he really shouldn’t.

xoxoxox

3 July, 1979
*(one month after the Ministry Invasion)*

Alice found the redhead sitting in a back booth of the Hog’s Head. Two empty shot glasses flanked the one that was still smoking with Firewhisky.

*Well this can’t be good.*

“Getting started without me?”

Lily Evans opened her mouth, but a fiery belch pushed whatever she’d planned to say out of the way. “Oh hell,” she grumbled, cheeks flushing. “I’m never drinking this stuff again.” A moment later she tossed back the third shot.

Alice grinned as she signalled the Dearborn woman behind the bar to bring her a pint of Steaming.

“So what’s up?”

Lily idly started constructing a little pyramid out of her empty glasses. “How’s Frank?”

*Delaying tactic,* observed the Auror part of Alice, but the rest of her brightened.

“He’s getting better every day, though he’s about ready to throw his mum out of the house. Not that I’ll argue with that. Augusta’s great and all, but she’s…well, she’s just so Augusta.”

Lily’s nod was polite. *And entirely unbelievable,* Auror Alice added. *Remember what Moody says: ‘Most people are desperate to say what’s on their minds. Just give them time to do it.’*

After chewing her lip for a bit, the redhead finally abandoned pretences. “Want to be in a wedding? I know it’s kind of last minute, but—*”
“What? You mean yours?” Alice floundered even as Auror Alice mentally added another point to her ‘Mad-Eye’s always right, the bastard’ tally. “I mean, sure, if you need me, but why—”

Lily bit her lip. “Vana died. A few days ago.”

Alice’s stomach dropped. She didn’t really know the bubbly blonde who’d joined the Order with Lily, but the girl had been sweet and…

And alive.

“I thought the Healers said—” she cut herself as Lily shook her head.

“They tried. And so did she. For a whole damn month. The…the damage was just too much in the end.”

They were interrupted by Guin Dearborn dropping off a beer and, with an appraising look at Lily, a glass of water.

Alice stared at her beer, torn between guzzling the whole thing down and skipping the drinking and going straight to the sicking up.

That’s another one of us gone.

“I’m really sor—”

“Yeah.” Lily said in a clipped voice of forced calm. “Her parents they…they wanted a private funeral. I’m sure Albus will announce it at the next meeting. But,” she started, only to interrupt herself by downing the water as though it were Firewhisky, “but the wedding is still on. James and I thought—I dunno—we thought that postponing it would be like letting Him win. So. Anyway, I need one more bridesmaid, and my sister said no and I don’t really have many other female friends and—”

“I’d be honoured,” Alice interrupted in a quiet voice.

This whole war is just so much rubbish.

She eyed Lily’s empty shot glasses. “Yeah, this isn’t a night for beer.” With a flamboyant wave she signalled the bartender to bring them two more Firewhiskys.

A few moments later and she raised her glass. “To buggering wisdom!”

Lily shrugged and drank.

Once they were able to breathe again, the redhead sighed. “I’m not sure we really have wisdom to bugger.”

“Lily?”

She scoffed, her eyes distant. “It’s just…I’ve never killed anyone before. And now, I can’t—” The girl broke off with an angry shake of her head. “Ignore me. You’re an Auror so I must sound like a sentimental idiot.”

For a moment Alice only heard the sound of bodies hitting the floor, dead men who fell without screams.

Get yourself together.
“No, you really don’t. I’d never killed anyone before the Invasion either.”

“But I thought—that man, when you and Harry were kidnapped—”

Alice huffed. “No, I figured out eventually that it was Harry, not me. But he was still doing that
squib thing for whatever reason, the prat,” she said without venom. “But I thought I had killed Cross,
for a while at least, and it was still awful, even though he tried to kill me.” Her hands balled into fists.
“But this...this is worse.”

They sat in silence for a long time, neither really noticing when the barkeep dropped off unordered
custard tarts at their table, nor when they slowly began eating.

“I just…I just thought I was one of the good guys,” Lily finally confessed in a whisper.

What the hell? Well, of course we’re the g—

The image of prisoners curled around in each other in death on the Ministry’s black stone floor
slapped itself into her mind.

Oh hell.

“We’re not...” She licked her lips. “We’re not the bad guys, Lily. We’re the—the one who are
trying their best to be the good guys, I suppose. I mean, in the end, it’s all about why we’re fighting,
what we’re trying to do, right?”

As Lily nodded, Alice thought of Harry Aberforth.

“It’s like...Harry cast the Killing Curse, yeah? It’s a bloody Unforgivable, worst of the worst! But do
you think that makes him a bad guy?”

The other girl went very still. “I was so happy when it hit You-Know-Who,” she admitted quietly.

“Me too. And if it had worked, this war would be over. It was good. Or maybe right? Or necessary?
Hell, I don’t know. But it...I can’t say that using it on Him was bad.”

Lily nodded sharply. “You’re right.” She flashed two fingers to the bartender.

Alice raised an eyebrow. I am?

The redhead just quirked a humourless smile as a frowning Guin Dearborn delivered two more shots
of Firewhisky. “You’re right. Bugger wisdom.”

Alice couldn’t help but laugh a little as they clinked their glasses together.

xoxoxox

11 July, 1979
(six weeks after the Ministry Invasion)

Albus rushed down the hallway to meet Madame Pomfrey, blithely ignoring the calls of Barty
Crouch and quite a few other functionaries whose names he pretended to know.

In the aftermath of the so-called ‘Ravaging of Diagon’ earlier that week—really, he thought, when
will we have a month without an event that earns capital letters?—it seemed every Ministry
employee had urgent business with him. Their neediness was all the more exasperating since now
they all essentially worked in his home.
Please, let us find a way to reopen the Ministry soon, he prayed on a regular basis.

Granted, the Ravaging of Diagon was at once a heartening and perplexing development. A score of Death Eaters under the command of Bellatrix Lestrange had Apparated at either end of the Alley and started indiscriminately burning every building they passed.

Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, however, had invested in one of the Prewett boys’ Aggression Detection clocks, and had immediately contacted both Albus and Barty Crouch. Within minutes they had mustered nearly all the surviving Aurors and Order members.

When they’d Apparated in, they were pleasantly shocked to find that the shopkeepers and patrons of the Alley had rallied and sent the Death Eaters into a retreat. Unfortunately, the denizens of Diagon were unable to halt the course of the Fiendfyre Lestrange had lobbed at the Quidditch supply store.

By the time the Aurors and Order quenched the flames, more than half the Alley was in ashes.

“Buck up, everyone! They won’t get us down! We’ll rebuild!” A soot-covered Florean Fortescue had shouted to the enthusiastic cheers of the crowd.

Indeed, Albus’ spirits were buoyed that everyday witches and wizards were stepping up to combat the threat to their world.

Still, the reasons for the attack were lost on him. The Ravaging accomplished nothing for Tom’s side, really, and the man himself had not appeared.

Has Tom lost control of his subordinates?

Is he still suffering from the curses I hit him with?

Is this yet another distraction?

He shook his head and picked up his pace. These are thoughts for later.

Poppy’s brief message had only said that she needed to see him in Harry’s room as soon as possible. Hurrying through the halls of the school, he steeled himself for bad news.

Oh Ab. I did try. I swear I tried.

The matron was bustling up just as he arrived.

“I’ve received a notification, but I’ve not been in yet.”

Without another word, she led the way into the quarters that one of Harry’s friends had obviously taken the time to redecorate to suit his tastes.

He stopped in surprise at the sight of Argus Filch sitting in one of the bedside chairs reading the Daily Prophet to the too-still young man.

“Ah, Argus, I had forgotten that you and Mr. Aberforth—”

“We’re friends, Headmaster” the dour man said curtly. “Harry likes to keep up with the news. Hagrid dropped it off, but couldn’t stay today.”

Albus smothered a smile that he knew the other man wouldn’t appreciate.

“Thank you, Mr. Filch,” Poppy smoothly interjected. “But I’m sorry, I have to—”
Filch stood up abruptly. “Yes ma’am. See you later then, Harry.” He left the room without another word.

Poppy was speaking before Dumbledore could ask. “The brainwave alert spell spiked.”

“What?” he sputtered. “But it’s been _six weeks._”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Headmaster, I _can_ count. But it definitely registered something…”

Both held their breath as she removed the adhesive spell and opened the boy’s eyes.

“Harry? Harry can you hear me,” the matron asked softly.

Dull, dead green stared into nothingness.

“Well,” Poppy said, attempting to find her no-nonsense bedside voice as she spelled the boy’s eyes shut again. “It’s still something. But I apologize for summoning you for this…I’d hoped…I suppose we shall simply have to wait and see.”

_I do so hate waiting and seeing,_ Albus grumbled to himself.

17 July, 1979
(a little more than _six weeks after the Ministry Invasion)_

Lily Evans frowned and reread the directions.

_Remove cap of pin in centre of clock face. Place three drops of your blood and three drops of his blood inside. Recap. Cast Tempus Familiae on the pin. Within five minutes, hands representing the two blood donors will appear._

She looked at the clock face, and then back at the directions again.

_How in the world did I cock this up?_

The handsome mahogany mantle clock that she had commissioned from the Prewett brothers as a wedding present for James sat there, taunting her.

_There must be a problem with one of the charms or the enchantments. I’ll have to take it back and have them take a look._

_Lovely. The wedding is in less than two weeks and all I needed was one more thing to have to do. And now I’ll probably need to figure out a way to ‘accidentally’ cut James again. Just lovely._

With an annoyed little huff she shoved the clock into a drawer where her fiancé wouldn’t find it, and left for a meeting with Albus.

In the darkness of the drawer, underneath a silk camisole and a few pairs of old knickers, the new Potter Family Clock ticked on. One slender hand rested in the space marked _Travelling,_ while another hand with squared edges indicated someone was out enjoying _Marauders’ Time!_ A third hand, simple but sharp, pointed stubbornly at _Mortal Peril._

24 July, 1979
seven weeks after the Ministry Invasion

“Ah, Mr. Prewett! I did not expect to find you here.”

Fabian idly twirled his mustache. “Just waiting on Gideon, sir. Thought he’d stop in and see Harry for a mo’.”

Albus inclined his head. He’d heard that Harry and the younger Prewett boy had been involved, but thought the relationship had ended long before the Ministry Invasion. “I see. And may I congratulate you on a rather fantastic armchair, my boy? The pineapple pattern is particularly fine.”

Preening, the redhead settled himself deeper into the fuchsia monstrosity that he’d transfigured in the hallway outside Harry’s room. “I just try to bring joy wherever I go, sir. You can ask any girl in Hogsmeade.”

Albus couldn’t have held back his laugh if he had tried. Mr. Prewett, your shamelessness may have driven poor Minerva to distraction, but I find you wonderfully refreshing.

“I’ve heard that Harry is improving. Is that true, sir?” Prewett asked.

Albus sobered. “Indeed. Madame Pomfrey reports that his readings are now on par with an individual in a coma, a great leap forward from his earlier condition. We have high hopes.”

The other man looked thoughtful but their conversation was interrupted by the other Mr. Prewett exiting the room, his complexion pale and sallow. With a perfunctory nod towards the Headmaster, he moved to depart with his brother.

“I trust I shall see you both here this weekend for the Potter wedding,” Albus asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” the elder Prewett grinned and waved. Albus listened closely to their conversation as they walked down the hall.

“‘How’d he look?’ He…he didn’t really look like Harry,” Gideon was saying.

“Feel better that you finally came?”

Albus had to strain to hear the brother’s reply. “No…no, not really.”

Sighing, he entered the room and looked carefully at his nominal nephew.

The younger Prewett, he thought, is not incorrect. He doesn’t look himself.

No matter how many nutritional potions a person was administered, weeks of illness, inactivity, and confinement exacted a high price from the human body. Harry had lost quite a bit of weight, and his skin was a startling white offset by dark splotches under his eyes.

But he is improving. I must remember that.

Swirling pink drew his reluctant attention to the painting that faced Harry’s bed. Mrs. Dearborn had finally convinced him—herself obviously being prompted by the painting’s inhabitant—to move his portrait of Ariana to Harry’s room.

“Hello, my dear,” he solemnly addressed the painted girl, who had paused in her pursuit of corncockles to approach the edge of her frame.

Blowing a kiss, Ariana settled on the ground with an expectant look.
“Oh, I don’t really think—”

Her smile turned into a glare.

“Surely others are more suit—”

Ariana yawned dramatically. Then glared some more.

“My dear, I only stopped in for a moment. There is a war on, you see, and I must…”

The playful glare was drowned by the slow flood of disappointment that washed over her face.

Albus attempted to avert his eyes, but they flicked back to his sister as though they had a mind of their own.

*There has always been something more pressing, something more important, hasn't there?*

*There’s always been a good excuse.*

He sighed. “It will keep, I suppose. This one, is it? Where have you left off?”

Ariana quickly began pantomiming to indicate that they hadn’t yet started the cheap-looking Muggle book that sat on Harry’s bedside table.

Albus shrugged and settled into the armchair to read to his painted sister and the comatose “nephew” he hardly truly knew.

“Let’s see then,” he hummed, thumbing to the first page. “It is called *From Russia with Love*, and it begins: ‘The…the naked man who lay splayed out on his face beside the swimming pool,’ *what?*” he sputtered in shock. “*What? What are you—what is this, Ariana?”*

She grinned and motioned for him to get on with it.

*Living at the Hog’s Head has thoroughly corrupted her! Damn you, Aberforth!*

“Well, if you are sure, but…” He eyed the offensive little book dubiously and cleared his throat.

“‘The naked man who lay splayed out on his face beside the pool might have been dead. He might have been drowned and been fished out of the pool and laid out on the grass to dry while the police or the next-of-kin were summoned…’” (*

As he continued reading the strange and shocking novel, he vowed that, whenever Harry recovered, the two of them would have a little chat about reading material appropriate for his sister.

*xoxoxox*

2 August, 1979

*two months after the Ministry Invasion; three years since Harry left canon world*

It was just gone two in the morning when Lily Potter left her husband snoring softly in their bed, retrieved an object from her bureau, and crept on silent feet down to her dining room.

She and James had opted not to take a honeymoon abroad, desiring to simply spend a week at home in each other’s company (*fucking like rabbits*, as James put it) and near to their friends in case of an emergency.

This was her first opportunity to sneak away.
On the table she placed the defective Family Clock she had purchased from the Prewetts.

Both Gideon and Fabian had been flabbergasted by the strange malfunction when she’d taken it back a few weeks before.

“It should only react to the blood of the donors!” Fabian insisted. “Only the two donors and any offspring which shares both their blood should get hands. We’ve done this more than a dozen times now!”

Lily closed her eyes. She didn’t want to ask, she truly didn’t, but she was set to marry James in less than a week. “And if one of the donors…has a child with someone else?”

Gideon shook his head. “No. Has to be both donors.”

Well, I would have definitely noticed that, Lily thought.

Fabian scrutinized the clock again and ran a series of what she assumed were diagnostic spells. “Honestly, everything checks out. I just don’t understand.”

“The third hand, the one pointed at ‘Hospital,’ it’s, well, it has moved. Up until a few days ago it was pointed at ‘Mortal Peril’ instead.”

“That simply wouldn’t happen if it was a fluke in the magic,” Gideon pronounced flatly.

Fabian shrugged. “I really just don’t understand,” he repeated.

In the end, she had settled for one of the brothers’ ‘emotional-barometer’ clocks for James, hopeful that it might help them both avoid unnecessary arguments. But she had insisted on paying for it rather than trading in the malfunctioning Family Clock.

With the whirlwind of the wedding, she had put the strange clock out of her mind for the rest of July and concentrated on enjoying herself as much as she could, despite the dark cloud cast by the Invasion.

The chance to show her Muggle parents around Hogwarts had definitely been a high point. Albus normally never allowed weddings on the grounds but, given the precariousness of the war and the work she had put in over the summer, he’d thought it an appropriate bonus for her.

Somehow, long after the wedding feast when the party was slowly winding down, her mother had gotten on the topic of the young man who had helped her out of the country, even as Lily motioned for her to say nothing.

“Oh, I do wish I knew his name,” her mother said. “He really did save our lives, I’m sure of it, not to mention Petunia’s.”

Lily’s eyes nervously went to James at her mother’s slip. Thankfully, he was engrossed in watching Sirius help a still-weak Marlene to the dance floor.

“He did have the loveliest blue eyes,” June went on.

Lily hid a grin. Her mother would never get used to the idea of glamours. Harry’s eyes were just as green as Lily’s were.

She shook her head and guided the conversation to safer topics.

A few days later Lily had stopped dead while washing the dishes, the thought that Harry’s eyes are...
**just as green as mine are** echoing in her head.

Some thrill of an emotion she couldn’t name had unfurled in her stomach.

Harry had been near death all summer, she knew, but not long before Albus had announced that he was slowly improving.

Right around the time that the mystery hand moved from ‘Mortal Peril’ to ‘Hospital.’

She’d nearly dropped the plate she was charming clean.

So tonight she sat in her dining room and looked at the clock. A moment later, she removed a chain from around her neck and stared at the dog tag that Harry Aberforth had once given to her mother, the one that had allowed him to answer Petunia’s distress call.

*This is stupid. I’m being stupid.*

Nonetheless, her hand was already gripping her wand and pointing it at the dog tag. She had always been particularly gifted in Charms, and had little doubt that she could unravel and identify whatever enchantments were on the necklace with relative ease.

Twenty minutes later she sat back once again, eyes wide and unseeing.


And *Vox Familiae.*

A charm which could only forge links between blood relatives.

*And it was on the tag that allowed Petunia to call him.*

Her fingers felt numb and clumsy.

*Harry’s related to Petunia.*

...

*He’s related to me.*

She stared at the clock, heart beating an unsteady tattoo against her chest. The third hand—slim, simple, and sharp—continued to point at ‘Hospital.’

*Who the hell are you, Harry Aberforth, and what are you to me?*

xoxoxox

*This concludes Arc III.*

xoxoxox
Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is taken from Don McLean’s classic “American Pie,” ©1971: “and there they were all in one place, a generation lost in space, with no time left to start again...” The phrase “lost in space” is an obvious reference to the 1960s American television programme.

(*) From Russia With Love ©1957 by Ian Fleming and available open-sourced through Project Gutenberg; all quotations from the beginning of Chapter One.

Next on The Second String: The final Arc begins with Chapter 34, “Uncomfortably Numb.”

What to expect in Arc IV: Well, my personal title for it is “Harry Potter and the Oh, For Fuck’s Sake, Let’s Just Get This Shit Done.” So, you can expect for the shit to be gotten done.

Two General Notes
1. I’ve had notes on it before, but in case you missed them, yes, Harry’s horcrux was removed in chapter one when the Dementor Kissed him.
2. This story ends conclusively with Arc IV. There will be no sequels.
   Thank you, as always, for reading my story. I’m excited about the final arc, and I really hope that you enjoy the hard march to the conclusion.
XXXIV. Uncomfortably Numb

He’d been buried alive.

Tonnes of earth pressed down upon him, crushing his lungs, filling his mouth, plugging his nostrils. The weight left him broken, helpless.

He’d been buried alive, but he wasn’t dying.

And he wasn’t alone.

There were things in the dirt. Crawling things. Alien things. Things with more legs than was decent.

They skittered through the damp soil to him, crawling into his clothes, over his face, and into his mouth and nose. Something with many legs found its way into his left ear. Another wormed its way between his thighs.

He tried to scream, but all that did was cause even more earth, more of them to move deeper into his throat.

The unbearable weight pressed down on him, the vile things invaded him, and all the while he could do nothing but lay trapped in the dark depths and let it happen.

Time blinked and lurched. There was too much and too little of it here.

Sometimes he tried scrabbling his arms in the earth, tried to shift the weight, to pull himself out.

He would fail, and slump back into what was left of himself. Stay still. Stay quiet.

But then he would try again.

And again.

And there came a time when his finger managed to trace a curve in the dirt.

And another time when two more fingers joined it.

And then his hand.

And then his arm.

Every time the dirt pressed pushed him down again, every time he fell back a bit.

But still, each movement was more than the one before it, even as aeons earth seemed to stretch out between those bursts of progress.

*I will bear it until I can escape it* was the only coherent thought he had the sanity left to have.
Inches measured by ages of the earth.

One arm became two arms.

His feet scrabbled, grit grinding between his toes.

The crawling things skittered, the chittering of their wings and mouths and legs trying to lead him down, down, down.

NO.

Dirt packed into his mouth as he screamed his denial.

The earth pressed down on him all the more, the crawling things swarmed upon him, but he pushed back.

With groping arms and flailing legs he rose and rose, until at last he broke through the final barrier and burst forth to breathe in air, real air.

Harry opened his eyes.

xoxoxox

12 August, 1979

Poppy Pomfrey scowled at the massive man snoring loudly in a bedside armchair that had apparently buckled under his weight.

I’ll try one more time and then it’s Aguamenti for him, she decided.

“Mr. Hagrid? Mr. Hagrid! I insist that you wake up this instant!”

“Whazzit?” The half-giant opened a bleary eye. “Oh…M’sorry ‘bout that, Madame Pomfrey. Musta’ dozed off.”

“You did. About seven hours ago.”

Hagrid did her the courtesy of looking abashed. “Sorry ‘bout that as well, then, ma’am. Just don’ want him wakin’ up alone again, ye see.”

Inwardly, Poppy melted. Hagrid was such a dear man. “I see….Well, yes, that is appreciated. And rest assured he will wake up again. Last time was only for a few moments, according to the Diagnostic. These things take time.”

“Yeah, but has his mind gone soft? I heard some folks talkin’ on that and they said– ”

She’d heard more than enough of that tripe, logical though it may be. Healing is ninety percent skill and experience, and ten percent hope, her mentor had always said, but that last bit is the most important part.

“I’d advise you not to listen to the gossip of those with limited Healing knowledge, Mr. Hagrid. Do you trust them or me?” she snapped, observing with satisfaction the hope that brightened the man’s features.

Of course he’ll wake up, she reassured herself.
But I do wish he’d get on with it.

xoxoxox

14 August, 1979

Voices, broken and distant.

“…can’t say…Gynes any good…Harpies…”

There must be dirt in his ears, he thought vaguely.

“…said it once, I’ll…the Falcons…on the Wasps this season…”

Harpies? Falcons? Wasps?

“…wishful thinking that the Cannons…chance.”

The cannons?

Is someone shooting at me?

His lashes pulled painfully as he tried to peel his eyes open, like they’d been stuck to his face with glue.

The room was a too-bright blur and his vision spun, but the redhead by his bed felt wonderfully familiar.

The Chudley Cannons.

“Ron?” Harry gasped out, his voice cracking through a throat scraped raw.

He felt more than saw the figures crowd closer to his bed. Fingers touched him, prodded him.

“Ron? Wha’ happened? Di’ we—we lose a match?” Every word hurt more than the one before it, but he knew that something important had happened—his jumped against his chest—and that he hoped they’d won at…at Quidditch maybe?

“Di’ I catch the Snitch?” he slurred.

“I’ll get Pomfrey,” a woman’s voice said.

Ron leaned in closer. “Harry? Hey there….How are you f–”

Yeah. Yeah, I’m Harry.

But there was no relief in the thought.

Instead he felt like he was being smothered by a thick blanket that made everything too hot and left him breathless. “Ron! I don’ understand–”

Without warning a surge of dizzying panic coursed through him. Everything was wrong, all wrong. Everything that was him had been shoved into something else. He didn’t fit, couldn’t fit—

The words came in a rush, blistering his throat. “Not my skin—I’m someone else’s—all wrong—not my hands, they’re not my hands, oh God!”
He had to get it off, tear off all the skin that wasn’t his own so he could be right again.

“Merlin, fuck!” Something was forcing his arms down, but all he could see now was pinwheeling white. “Dammit, Harry, stop, you’re hurting yourself!”

“Hold him still, Mr. Prewett!” a voice commanded sharply.

Suddenly a warm, full sensation bloomed in his stomach. Harry felt his muscles going limp, his mind falling into a comforting daze.

“Ron?” he murmured.

But the blurred redhead who peered down at him looked as wrong as his own body felt.

*Ron doesn’t have a mustache.*

“S’all wrong…”

Harry fell into quiet nothingness.

xoxoxox

When he awoke sometime later, it was to a body that throbbed like it had been bruised black and thoughts that kept slipping through his fingers.

Gritting his teeth, he groped blindly through his mind and latched onto the few things that felt true.

*I’m Harry.*

*I’m Harry. I own a bar. I got hurt in a battle.*

*I’m not from here.*

His shaking breaths slowed down as he repeated it to himself.

Knowing who he was and why he was in pain, at least generally, kept the panic that was skulking around the edges of his mind at bay. There was more to getting hurt at—at the Ministry?—but he was only gingerly holding onto reality, so that was pushed aside for now.

He cracked his eyes open and looked around.

Late afternoon light spilled through a large window into a bedroom as cosy as it was unfamiliar.

“Well, there you are,” the woman by his bed smiled.

*I know her face.*

As soon as the diagnostic spell hit him, her name bloomed in his mind. “Poppy?” He tried to swallow the feeling of glass shards in his throat.

“You’re at Hogwarts, Harry, don’t fret. Just a private room.” The matron cast a few more spells on him that tingled his memory. *Yeah. I know those. She taught me those.* “Try not to move or speak too much. You’ve taken quite the nap.”

With every breath he remembered more of himself.

“What—what happened to me? I feel…” He licked his lips experimentally and grimaced. Even they
ached. “I feel really bad.”

Poppy tsked. “You decided it was a fine idea to duel a Dark Lord is what happened! What you were thinking I can’t even begin to— “ She cut herself off, expression softening. “You were hit by a curse, Harry. Something we haven’t seen before. That was more than two months ago.”

Two months? he repeated dumbly, images and moments that he was totally not prepared to think about exploding in his mind. With a wrench, he dragged himself back to the present.

“Every…everything hurts,” he admitted, wincing at the feeble sound of his voice.

She sighed. “I’m not surprised. As far as I can tell, every cell in your body reacted as though experiencing significant trauma, rather like your entire being was hit with a bludgeoner. But no trauma actually manifested itself physically. No blood, no bruising. Nothing. You’ve been quite the irritating puzzle.”

When she looked away, it dawned on him that she wasn’t telling him everything.

Worry later. I feel too shitty now.

“At any rate,” the matron continued as she handed him a few potions and a glass of water, “now you seem to be healing well enough, albeit taking your time.” She smiled as he made a face at the taste of the first potion. “Many people will be relieved to hear you’re awake.”

When he reached for the second potion, his limbs suddenly felt too heavy. A breath later and some unbearable weight crashed upon him, a blinding darkness. The earth was pressing down on him, choking him, erasing him—

“Harry? Harry!”

“Huh?” The room spun back into focus. Poppy radiated concern, her wand’s tip lit to…to…to gauge the dilation of my eyes. Yeah.

“You went a bit blank there for a moment, dear. Not to worry, such disorientation is common after prolonged unconsciousness.” Her smile was tight, her crisp voice forced. “Would you like me to let one of your watchers back in so that you have some company?”

He could tell he was blinking too rapidly, but couldn’t seem to make himself stop. “Watchers?” he asked, more to distract himself than anything.

“Well, since you started showing signs of returning to us, your friends have tried to ensure that you’ll not wake up alone. Mr. Prewett had to leave, but your other visitor remained.”

Guin. Doc. Pel. His skin felt warmer, his heart not so flittering.

He shied away from wondering which Mr. Prewett she meant.

“I’ll just send her in. But finish those potions, or I’ll be able to tell when I return!”

She set a monitoring spell and left with a swish of her cotton robes.

Nestling deeper into the pillows, he took in the serenity of the room to calm his frayed nerves. Hanging opposite his bed was a painting of whirling pink flowers.

The small smile felt like it was cracking open his face, but he welcomed it nonetheless. Ariana.
Thank you Albus.

“Harry!”

Guin’s face was cheerful, but the only thing Harry could focus on was her massively swollen midsection. *Christ, I really have been asleep for a long time.*

The woman burst into the room as quickly as her body allowed—it was really more of a hurried waddle—and awkwardly threw her arms around him. “Oh, I’m so, so glad you’re awake, we’ve all been so worried!”

“Guin,” he gaped at the foreign feeling of her hug, “you’re really huge.”

Even dazed with pain and confusion, he knew it was a mistake the moment he said it.

Her smile dropped into the sort of frown that was usually the last thing a rowdy patron saw before getting thrashed with her Beater’s bat. After a moment, the corners of her mouth twitched up again.

“You get one freebie, one. I’ll let it go because you just woke up from a coma, Harry, but tread carefully. I know where you sleep.”

Laughing hurt as much as smiling did, but it still felt so good.

xoxoxox

16 August, 1979

Two days later, Harry was still feeling like his body had been wadded up into a ball and tossed around by the Weasley twins, but at least the flashbacks of earth and insects were dwindling.

A quiet knock sounded at the door, interrupting a morning spent in comfortable silence with Ariana. After a moment, a nervous-looking Alice Longbottom peeked her head in.

“Hey, Harry. I was scheduled to be your watcher today, but then you woke up…but I thought you might want some company, or—or I can just go?”

Alice was watching me? Sure, we fought together at the Ministry, but we haven’t spoken in more than a year…

“Alice was watching me? Sure, we fought together at the Ministry, but we haven’t spoken in more than a year…"

“Er, yeah. I mean, you can stay if you want.”

She smiled tentatively and sat down.

Silence stretched between them. Alice flicked her eyes over every inch of the room but the bed. Harry picked at his blanket.

They broke under the awkward pressure at the same moment.

“Frank doing okay?”

“I’m really sorry, Harry!”

Both stopped and looked at the other, Harry feeling quite wrong-footed in a conversation that was obviously going to go past the small-talk he’d been attempting.
“Yeah,” Alice blinked. “I mean, yes, Frank’s all right. He was in Mungo’s for a few weeks, but he’s already back on active duty. Uh, thanks for asking.” She bit her lip and finally met his eyes. “But I wanted to say that I’m really sorry. About what happened before, I mean. The Obliviation and everything.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it, unsure of what to say.

Alice ploughed on. “Honestly, I’m still not convinced what Dumbledore did was wrong, but I know it wasn’t really right either…and I’m sorry it happened. And I’m really sorry that I didn’t take you to the hospital when it seemed like you weren’t okay. I was just…” She looked away, her clenching hands torturing her robes. “I just didn’t know what to do. I know that’s a shit excuse, I know, but… but I don’t want to be the sort of person who lets things like that happen. I really don’t. So I’m just sorry.”

He closed his eyes.

“Harry? Are you—?”

“Just give me a mo’, Alice.”

She fell silent as his thoughts whirled into life.

Can I blame her for what Dumbledore did to me?

He didn’t need to dwell on that for long. True, she could have fought back harder, but she did try to talk the headmaster—her commander in the Order—out of it.

And besides, I know now how shitty it is to have no good options. His memory replayed the faces of Death Eaters he’d led into Myrtle’s warehouse, knowing full well they’d never come out again. We do what we think we have to do.

He sighed.

... 

Though what about not helping me when she thought the Obliviation had addled my mind?

That…that had hurt. It still hurt.

But I was kind of a bastard too... And what can she actually do about it now, really, other than say she’s sorry?

He sneaked a glance at her.

Alice’s typically happy face was clouded with misery and seemed very, very young.

A quick look in front of him revealed an Ariana thoroughly engrossed in their conversation. When she noticed his gaze, the painted girl smiled a sad little smile, the sort she used to give Ab whenever he was grousing about his brother.

I can either stay mad at her forever or I can forgive her.

His eyes traced the path of corncockles floating on the wind.

“Y’know Alice,” he said slowly. “I think I was right, that day at Hagrid’s. I don’t think we were friends.” She opened her mouth. “No, please don’t interrupt.” He chewed on his words thoughtfully.
“I think we were two decent people who liked each other. But we didn’t treat each other like friends should. I was right about you having priorities that made you a rubbish friend to me. And you were…yeah, you were right about me and the lying and being a rubbish friend to you.”

His mind went to the last time he’d spoken to Gideon, and for a moment he could almost hear the empty echo of a door clicking shut.

“I have to do it, and, no, I can’t say why, so that’s that….But I do get what you said. So… I forgive you. And I’m really sorry too. Maybe, I dunno, maybe we can try to actually be real friends this time, if you can accept me not telling you some things?”

Something like annoyance flashed in Alice’s eyes for a second, but then her lips curled into a hesitant smile.

“Yeah. Yeah, Harry, I’d like that.”

And with that, the awkwardness returned.

I guess it’s all well and good to decide to try to be friends, but the actual doing it isn’t so easy.

“So…” Alice started. “Has anyone told you what happened at the Ministry after the, uh, duel?”

Harry sat up straighter, wincing at the sharp pull and dull series of aches. “No, hardly anything at all! I think they want me to heal or whatever. Bloody annoying. Guin and Doc would’ve told me, but apparently they don’t even really know!”

Alice’s smile turned sly. “Well, I can fix that.”

xoxoxox

Half an hour later, Harry sat back in shock.

The Ministry’s gone…they were Imperiused innocents…

Oh Nappy. Goddammit it all so much.

He should’ve been filled with revulsion and guilt, but instead everything just felt numb.

Voldemort had seemed injured after he had cast that spell… His mind shrank back. Alice’s description of what the curse had done to him only led to the skittering of insects in his head.

“So—so no one knows what it was then?” he asked.

Alice shook her head. “We really didn’t expect you to get better.” She favoured him with the sort of glance she’d given him back when they’d first met, a bright-eyed look that seemed desperately aimed at cheering him up. “But you did! So His plan didn’t work! That’s gotta be worth something, right?”

“Right…” he muttered in distraction. “I think I need to talk to Albus.”

And I need to figure out how the hell to fight a war against a Voldemort who can walk away from a Killing Curse.

He glanced at Alice as an idea formed.

It’s not enough, but it is something.
“It was really wicked how you stopped that Conflagration Bomb thing by yourself, you know.”

The blonde preened.

“Think you can show me how to do stuff like that once I get out of here? I’m not bad, but I wouldn’t even know where to begin against that sort of thing.”

Alice raised an eyebrow. “Well…since we’re friends and all, I could probably make the time…” She nudged his shoulder with her own. “If I’m sufficiently bribed with alcoholic beverages, that is.”

Harry grinned. “Well fancy that, I own a pub.”

xoxoxox

21 August, 1979

He ignored the muscles which screamed that this was a bad idea as he peered around a corner, his mind focused only on escape.

This was the most alive he had felt in days.

Sure, Poppy had been great as always, and he’d enjoyed a stream of visitors from the Head, not to mention a perpetually teary Hagrid, still tentative Alice, and strangely comforting Filch. Indeed, the Hogwarts caretaker was his most frequent companion. Argus never said much, spending his time reading the Prophet with or, if Harry wasn’t feeling well, to him.

But being bedridden with a body that kept betraying him by not healing bloody fast enough was driving Harry to distraction.

“Your injuries are still not understood and very serious,” Poppy kept saying. “Extensive trauma like this takes time to heal. Be patient.”

She was right, of course, but…but I’m tired of being so bored!

Today an opportunity had finally presented itself. Poppy had been distracted by a Wizengamot member who’d missed the trick step on the grand staircase, and in her haste she’d forgotten to reset the alert spell around his bed.

Freedom! his mind exulted as he staggered down a side hall. This is great!

This is not great, it fucking hurts, his body sniped back. Get back to bed.

His mind blithely ignored his body. It also decided not to pay attention to the fact that he needed a white-knuckled grip on banisters, walls, and anything that would steady him, really.

Freedom!

He was halfway down a corridor on the main floor when he realized he had no idea how to enjoy his liberation.

Shaking his head at his lack of foresight, he hobbled off with a vague desire to see the Great Hall.

As he rounded the corner to the Entrance Hall, the chittering throng of bureaucrats, functionaries, and hangers-on forcefully reminded him that the school was now also the home of the Ministry of Magic.
And of course I’m still in pyjamas and a dressing gown. A flush heated his face. Oh well done, me.

He used Will’s wand to quickly transfigure his clothing into an ill-fitting approximation of robes and skulked along the perimeter, hoping to escape everyone’s notice.

“aren’t you supposed to be in bed, aberforth?” a man in auror dress by the door to the great hall remarked dryly.

Order member. Um…Bones. Edgar bones. He was at the ministry. Did the lifts.

Harry shrugged. “I escaped.”

“And I thought you were insane after hearing about the battle on Eleven. Why in the world would you escape to here?” Bones shook his head and moved away from the door. “Whatever. If it’s politics you want, I won’t stop you after what you did for us.”

Not quite knowing what was going on, but delighted that it was something other than lying in bed, he nodded his thanks and walked into the great hall.

xoxoxox

Harry stopped dead.

Oh yeah. Bones said something about politics. Shite.

Some over-dressed man with a mealy voice was speaking, standing atop the dais which usually housed the high table. In place of the House tables were rows of chairs filled with ministry types.

Several disapproving faces turned and scowled at his intrusion. Ignoring the burning in his cheeks, he quickly made his way to the first open seat he could find.

I really should have stayed in bed.

The woman next to him tittered, nose wrinkling as though he smelled foul. “Oh dear, they’ll let anyone in, won’t they?” she muttered in a saccharine voice.

Harry gave her a once-over, curling his lip at the shocking pink robes and matching hat. “Apparently,” he agreed flatly.

Her indignant response was interrupted by the swishing of taffeta that announced the approach of professor pemphredo. The ancient divination teacher sank in less-than-elegant response into the chair on Harry’s other side, her violent purple gown and petticoats forcing him to scrunch himself up between the two women.

“My little devil! How lovely to see you up and about,” she enthused, heedless to the scandalized looks her normal volume drew.

“Good to see you too, professor.” Harry said in a much lower voice. “I wouldn’t have expected you’d be interested in something like this.”

The old woman cackled loudly. He felt the witch next to him tense. “I found myself with an uneventful morning and wished to alleviate the tedium, though clearly the intended cure is worse than the disease.” She narrowed her eyes at the speaker. “My goodness, this fellow—a selwyn if I’m not mistaken—has all the charisma of a dead flobberworm.”

“Hem-hem!” the woman next to Harry coughed. “I’m sure you don’t mean to disrupt the
“Unsurprising,” the professor shot back. “You always did lack imagination, dear. I simply told the Aurors outside that I would either enter or use the Entrance Hall to set up my hepatomancy table.” Pemphredo’s smile was poisonous. “They were most accommodating.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow.

“Hepatomancy is divination by studying animal entrails, dear boy, most often the liver. An effective, though untidy, practice.”

The pink witch coughed with exaggerated delicacy.

Grinning, he shifted closer to the Professor. *Lesser of two evils by far.*

As he listened to the Selwyn person speak, Harry realised that the man was attempting to persuade the audience to vote for him as the new Minister for Magic.

His hackles rose at the man’s honeyed words praising the advantages of pursuing a ‘purely diplomatic solution’ to the ‘simple ideological differences that currently divide the illustrious families of wizarding Britain.’

His hand groped blindly for Will’s wand when the man dismissed concerns about the Muggleborn as ‘melodrama designed to foster distrust in the Ministry.’

Next to him, the Ministry witch cooed and simpered.

“Quite the feculent little twat, isn’t he?” Pemphredo’s casual observation cut through the silence of the crowd.

The man on the dais froze, red-faced, as much of the audience started chuckling.

The professor tipped Harry a wink.

*Barney old bird,* he thought with a fond shake of his head.

After Selwyn finally sat down to sparse applause, two more speakers followed. One, an ancient man wearing what looked like Ron’s dress robes and an old-fashioned ear trumpet, spoke in a wheezy voice that was as engaging as Binns’ drone.

The last was a middle-aged woman in a Muggle-style business suit, who delivered what Harry considered a rousing address filled with practical ideas.

“Lovely student Ms. Swanborough was,” Pemphredo murmured to him as they both clapped enthusiastically. “Of course, poor Stella hasn’t a chance, what with being a Muggleborn. Little Nobby may have done it in the ‘60s, but there’s nothing for it in today’s climate.” (*)

The pink witch sniffed dramatically.

Harry ignored her. “So who’s going to win then?”

Pemphredo’s plum-painted lips split into a wolfish smile. “The smart money’s on Barty. Though I wouldn’t expect him to last the year.”
A rail-thin man rose as the applause died down “Well, thank you Ms. Swanborough—hmm, _interesting_ surname—for sharing your thoughts with us. This concludes the introductory speeches made by those seeking the office of Minister of Ma—”

“What about Dumbledore?” a woman called out.

The man bristled. “I’m afraid I’ve heard nothing—”

“Oh stuff it, Van Burm!” a man interrupted. “This has gone on all summer, and we need someone to actually fix things! Let’s just elect Dumbledore today and be done with it!”

“The elections aren’t for another week, you know that!” The speaker rubbed his hands together nervously. “And Dumbledore’s not on my list of candidates!”

“Well put him there!” another woman ordered.

Harry studied the expressions of the four candidates on the dais. The Selwyn fellow looked livid, Barty Crouch Senior seemed to have swallowed a lemon, the Muggleborn woman was smothering a smile, and the Binns-impersonator had fallen asleep.

The crowd was growing more insistent in their clamour for Dumbledore’s candidacy when the man himself finally rose from a seat in the audience and ascended the dais. His eyes widened a fraction when he saw Harry even as he smiled genially at the room.

“My friends, I thank you for your support. However,” he sighed, “our Ministry requires a leader who will make his or her position their only public priority. I am already an educator and your Chief Warlock.” _And leader of the Order of the Phoenix_, Harry added. “But I cannot be effective in either of these roles if I try to do them both and more. So thank you, truly, but I must decline.”

With a whirl of his lime green robes Dumbledore retook his seat while the functionary attempted to quell the rising din of voices. But there seemed to be no stopping the audience now.

Harry’s heart beat in sympathy for Albus as the crowd’s desperate pleas turned to panicked shouts that Dumbledore was abandoning them, and then on to furious calls for the Ministry to force him to “do his duty.”

_No matter what he does, it’ll never be enough for some people_.

_Merlin, the wizarding world really is shite when it comes to its heroes._

On the other hand, the pink Ministry witch was still seething loudly about the injustice of Dumbledore eclipsing a man as great as the Selwyn bloke when Harry made to leave the room.

Although every muscle hurt as he elbowed through the crowd, he enjoyed the irony that he was now attempting to escape _back_ to the Hospital Wing.

He ignored the cacophony of voices behind him, but was forced to turn when a hand touched his shoulder.

Dumbledore beamed at him, though he looked rather wild about the eyes. A dozen witches and wizards swarmed and hovered, all clamouring for attention.

“Harry! I hadn’t thought I’d see you today,” he said over the babbling of frantic voices. “My friends, my friends, please! I have urgent business related to the war to discuss with my compatriot here.”

Harry didn’t miss the plea in the man’s eyes. “That is, of course, if he is amenable to a conversation.”
“Uh, sure. Yeah, I’m, er, amenable.”

Dumbledore gave the crowd one last, regretful smile and gestured towards the door. “After you, then.”

xoxoxox

They were halfway to the Headmaster’s office, Dumbledore respecting Harry’s laboured pace, when the younger wizard finally spoke up.

“You just used me to escape them all, didn’t you?”

Albus had the grace to look a bit guilty, though his eyes were shining. “I did, and my apologies for that. They are most insistent, and I did want to speak with you as soon as you were healthy enough.”

Harry laughed. “No, it’s fine. I was trying to escape anyway myself.”

As they rounded a corner, a group of men who’d been in a huddled conference caught sight of Dumbledore and hurried towards them.

“Oh Harry, would that you could run,” the Headmaster murmured.

xoxoxox

Harry sank gratefully into the armchair Dumbledore conjured for him. “Oh thank God we made it.”

They’d been stopped another three times by Ministry minions before it occurred to Dumbledore that Disillusionment spells were needed.

“You’re looking quite pale, Harry. Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to have our discussion another day?”

He waved away Dumbledore’s concern. “Poppy’s already going to give me hell for this. I might as well finish it in one go.”

An elf popped in with mugs of hot chocolate, which the pair savoured in silence.

“I take it you have heard from others about what we know of the Ministry Invasion and its effects?” Albus finally asked.

“Yeah. I mean, I heard most of it from Alice, and a few of the others filled in some bits.” Fabian had told him about the Atrium battle, though Harry had only listened with half an ear after the man let it slip that Gideon had visited him while he was unconscious. Sirius, to his surprise, had shown up with a stack of pornographic magazines (mostly of women) to help “cheer him up and pass the time,” and had eventually given his account of the night. “But they haven’t…”

His tongue felt numb and too large. He didn’t want to ask. The horror of being buried alive still seemed real to him in the quiet hours of the night when he had only his own heartbeat for company.

But I need to know.

He forced the words out. “But they haven’t been able to tell me anything really about what Riddle did to me.”

Dumbledore lowered his eyes.

“I’m afraid I have very little information, but I shall share my suspicions with you, such as they are.
First, however I think it necessary to discuss the magical…event that preceded the curse.”

*Magical event?*

“I’m speaking, of course,” Dumbledore eyed him carefully, “of what happened when your wand and Voldemort’s connected.”

*The silver dome. Shite. I didn’t think of that.*

He scrambled to cobble together a believable explanation. “I wasn’t sure what would happen, but it definitely wasn’t *that*… It’s stupid, I know, but I was desperate and thought I could block his spell with one of my own.”

The headmaster gave him a flat look.

Ab snorted in his mind. *Really, lad? That’s what you’re goin’ with?*

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I wouldn’t believe that one either.”

Albus’ eyes twinkled.

“Look, sir, the first bit was true. I thought something would happen, yeah, but it really wasn’t that.” He took a deep breath. “And I can’t tell you any more about what I expected. I’m sorry, but Ab knew, and I swore to him I would never tell. It was the last thing he asked of me.”

Fawkes crooned into the silence.

Harry huffed out a disgusted breath and ran a hand through his hair. “My…someone I cared about wanted to know stuff I can’t talk about. I wouldn’t even tell him, and I lost him because of it.” *So there’s no way I’m telling you* went unspoken.

Dumbledore stared at him, his face a mystery. “I have always been a curious person, Harry,” he mused. “Indeed, one could rightly call me covetous of knowledge. This passion for knowing has led me to cultivate proficiency in a variety of rather obscure fields of magic.”

The Headmaster’s conversational tone was belied my a strange sharpness in his expression. “Tell me, do you know what Legilimency is?”

Suddenly wary, Harry shook his head.

“It is both a spell and methodology for, shall we say, entering and navigating the mind of another so as to access memories, thoughts, and so on.”

Harry’s body was blanketed with a stinging cold, as though he had plunged into a frozen pond.

“Quite a difficult skill to master,” Dumbledore continued lightly, “and one even more difficult not to abuse.”

*No.*

“One such as yourself should be on guard against practitioners who would invade your mind, Harry. Voldemort is certainly accomplished in the mind arts. Though do note that a Legilimens requires a degree of eye contact with his or her subjects.” The content of the Headmaster’s words warred with his tone, as casual as if he were simply discussing the weather.

*Why is he telling me this?* Harry screamed at himself, his eyes immediately flicking away from Albus
and landing on Fawkes. *Is this a threat? Is he going to do this to me if I don’t tell him?*

The phoenix peered at him curiously.

*But if he is, why tell me about the eye contact part?*

*What the hell is he trying to say?*

... And then clarity came.

*He’s telling me he could do this but…*

*…but that he won’t do this.*

Fawkes trilled.

*He wants me to trust him. Not because I don’t know what he could do to me, but because I do know.***

... *He’s trying to be a good person, the realization thrummed in him. That’s what this is. Just like Alice is trying.*

*Just like I’m trying.*

Harry couldn’t name the emotion that filled him then. Something like appreciation, and irritation, and camaraderie, but more and less than all those at the same time.

**Albus trusted me on Level Eleven. Now it’s my turn.**

He raised his eyes and looked directly into Dumbledore’s.

They stared at each other.

The moment stretched on before Dumbledore finally smiled. “Thank you, Harry,” he said softly.

Harry could only nod.

*I’m not Ab.*

*I love him, but like Pel said, that doesn’t mean that I have to inherit all his baggage.*

**And I can trust Albus. At least this much.**

The thought was both sad and liberating.

Albus cleared his throat awkwardly into the silence. “Thank you, Harry,” he repeated in a stronger voice. “For what it is worth, the dome seems most similar to the rare effect that can take place when brother wands are forced to battle, though the resemblance was slight at best. As I am quite sure no brother wand to Tom’s exists, I’m admittedly befuddled.”

Harry swallowed the pang that came with thinking of the loss of his last tie to his old world. More to avoid thinking about his wand than out of any real spite, he found himself smirking, “Well, maybe it’s what happens when Voldemort tries to battle his son.”
“Ah, yes,” the older man hedged. “I do owe you an apology for that mistake, I suppose. Though I stand by the fact that it was both a logical and…satisfying explanation. At any rate,” Albus continued over Harry’s chuckle, “I suspect that the dome and its effects, which clearly injured and exhausted you, had little to no bearing on what you experienced this summer, but for perhaps prolonging your recovery.”

The smile on Harry’s face died, the air in the room turning stale and heavy in an instant.

“Voldemort’s spell.”

“Yes. Voldemort’s spell.” Albus’ eyes dimmed.

Harry’s hands balled into fists. “Do you have any idea why he survived the Killing Curse?”

The old wizard sighed. “Ideas I have in abundance, but no, I don’t know. Yet.”

Frustration threw him to his feet. Pacing helped, even though every step sent his muscles to moaning. Spewing some of the choicest vulgarities he’d learned from pirates, drunks, and South American prostitutes alike was also rather gratifying.

“Do not presume that you are the only one upset by this!” Albus snapped, bringing Harry up short.

A moment later the headmaster slumped back into his chair. “I believe,” he continued in a gentler tone, “that the key will be found in his obvious physical changes.”

*Eyes so pale they were almost white, misshapen lips stretched into a hideous grin…*

“You see, Harry, Dark magic always exacts a price, always leaves a mark. Be it a discoloration of the eyes, degeneration of the skin, loss of hair, runic scars, and so on…And every Dark ritual, potion, curse, or artefact leaves its own particular marks, even if they cannot all be seen by the naked eye. Tom has obviously changed, so I am currently attempting to match his appearance to various magics.”

Harry’s breath caught.

*He didn’t look like a red-eyed snake.*

The man’s words, heard now in both worlds, echoed in his mind. “I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.”

*They were talking about different things. This Voldemort has done something different than my Voldemort did.*

It was obvious, of course, but he hadn’t let himself truly think about it until now.

Realising that the headmaster was looking at him intently, Harry found his voice. “I don’t suppose there’s a book like *One Thousand and One Evil Ways to Uglify Yourself*, is there?”

Albus chuckled. “Such a resource would make my task significantly easier, but no. Records are scattered and incomplete, and often not written by the…sanest of authors.”

Harry followed the man’s gesture to a stack of books on a side table. A small red text was whimpering as the cover of a leather-bound volume formed a snarling mouth. A moment later, the smaller flipped open and spat back a puff of fire.
“Shit! I mean, yeah, I see your point.”

“Indeed, certainly not bedtime reading. But that line of research is focused on what Tom has done to himself. We must still talk about the spell he used on you.”

Harry grimaced, trying not to feel the weight that seemed to press on him from all sides.

“Tell me, Harry, what do you know of Dementors?”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

He closed his eyes and swallowed the hysterical laugh burbling in his chest.

xoxoxox

23 August, 1979

“So the bastard didn’t die when you used the Killing Curse. That’s...Merlin.” Pel rubbed his face. “But he didn’t die in your world either, back when folks thought you’d beat him as a baby, right?”

Harry frowned, slumping into his pillows. He’d hoped that going through with Pel everything Albus had told him two days earlier would make him feel better, help him plan, but talking about it just drove home the horrible reality.

“Yeah, I guess. But Albus said that different types of Dark magic have different physical effects. And this Riddle looks nothing like the young Tom Riddle from the diary or Voldemort after the resurrection. Plus, I think my Voldemort turned into a wraith thing when he tried to kill me. This one just stood right back up.”

“Aye, does seem like they’re up to different things,” Pel mused, considering Harry closely from his perch on the bedside chair. “An’ I reckon that spell he hit you with was something you haven’t seen before either?”

Jesus, Voldemort tried to—

“Yeah,” he choked out. “Albus thinks Riddle’s coming up with spells that copy the effects of Dementors.” He wrenched his eyes away from Pel’s and stared at the empty portrait of Ariana. “But, there’s some good. I mean, both of us have countered him with patronuses, and that seemed to work somewhat. And Albus thinks that what—what he did to me weakened him and that’s why he’s been laying low.”

Pel’s brow crinkled. “But what actually happened to y—?”

“My soul,” Harry snapped. “Bastard tried to take my fucking soul.” He closed his eyes, willing his breathing to even out. “He said—Albus—that he thinks Riddle’s spell separated my soul from my body, but that Voldemort couldn’t actually cut it off completely.”

Pel’s stricken look faded into contemplation. “He’s trying to replicate the Kiss...The soul’s bound to the body an’ magic, the theorists think, but Dementors are able to dissolve those bounds easily.”

“How the hell do you know—?”

“I did all that research for you and Ab a few years back, thanks so much for remembering! Anyway, that’s what one book said at least.”

Harry stared at his blanket. “Yeah, Albus said something like that too. But he said that Riddle
couldn’t do it all the way, so the bonds stretched until my soul rebounded back into me like…like a snapped rubber band.”

“I take it that simile was your own contribution to the discussion?”

“Oh shut up,” he grumbled. “Anyway, he thinks I was…out of it this summer because the shock of my soul being removed and then rebounding caused…Well, I forget exactly what he said, but something like universal trauma either to the bonds that connect it to my body and magic.”

Skittering of insects began to fill the silence, and Harry forced himself to continue, remembering all too clearly this part of the conversation.

“And he said that my nightmares about…about being buried alive and all that were a good metaphor for my soul being ‘violently thrust back into the physical after an unnatural separation’ and having to get used to existing like this again. Something about it having to ‘acclimatize itself to being tethered to mass and magic’.”

“Hell,” Pel muttered. He shook his head and looked around the room. “Merlin, I need a damn drink.”

Harry shrugged. “Dwimmer!”

A house-elf immediately appeared at the foot of his bed with a crack. “Yes, Mr. Aberforth sir?”

“Would you get a pot of tea for me and a Steaming Stout for my guest please?”

The creature’s eyes narrowed. “Matron Poppy’s been saying no alcohol for you…”

“I swear, it’s for my friend.” Harry forced himself to smile.

The elf stared at him for a long moment then popped away, only to return with a full tea service and a large steaming tankard.

Pel’s jaw dropped.

“An’ how much do I owe you for that?” he asked the elf slowly.

“Thanks Dwimmer,” Harry said as the elf disappeared without a word to Pel.

“Wait—what—really?” the old man stuttered, eyes wide. “Are you telling me that drinks at Hogwarts are free!”

Harry grunted and added milk to his tea.

“All this time…all summer…damn, Harry, all this time I could have been drinking for free! Hell, I should have visited you more often!”

“Your concern is really touching. Gets me right here.”

Pel laughed and quaffed his drink. “Alright,” he mused, “I take it you didn’t clue Albus in to your previous experience with soul removal?”

“No…” Harry chewed his lip. “I really thought about it though. I don’t want us to suffer because I kept my mouth shut when I shouldn’t have. It’s just, this Voldemort is definitely different than my Voldemort, and his spell didn’t really feel like The Kiss. I mean, that didn’t hurt at all and I woke up right away.”
“Hmm,” the other man nodded slowly. “Aye, it’s different enough that I can’t see it being a real help to him. An’ besides, I’m sure he’s working with Unspeakables on this. If he’s not, he’s a bloody fool.”

“Dunno about that. But…well, he did ask me to help him some with it.”

Pel coughed through his beer.

“I know, I know, what good am I going to be? He’s Albus Dumbledore and I’m a bartender who never even took a NEWT class!” Harry groused.

It didn’t make any more sense to him now than it had when the headmaster proposed it, but Harry wouldn’t soon forget the warm sense of gratitude he’d felt at the offer.

_I’m involved. I can try to do something._

He was startled out of his thoughts by Pel’s hand clamping on his shoulder. “Don’t sell yourself short. An’ I’ll reach out to some of my old contacts. See if they can give us anything more.” The old solicitor looked away. “Now, my friend, how’s about we forget this tripe for a time, call that wonderful little elf back, an’ have some more beers together?”

“I can’t drink. Poppy would kill me.”

“Fine, I’ll drink, you watch.” Pel settled back into his chair with a grin. “Free drinks at Hogwarts. Should’a been a bloody professor!”

_xoxoxox_

26 August, 1979

A few days later, Harry made his way towards Dumbledore’s office on his first Poppy-sanctioned outing.

His friend had been furious with his disappearing act the week before, and he suspected that the extra days she’d required he spend in bed had been more a punishment than a prescription.

Rounding the corner to the corridor that led to Albus’ office, he had to sidestep quickly to avoid slamming into—

“Barty Crouch?” Harry burst out in surprise.

The older man’s razor-thin mustache seemed cut into his face as he frowned down at Harry. “Harry No Surname, or rather, Harry Aberforth, I’m told.” With every word the temperature in the corridor felt like it dropped a few degrees. “The squib-turned-wizard who tried to kill a Dark Lord,” Crouch spat, a furious flush colouring his cheeks.

What the hell?

“I don’t—”

Crouch Senior leaned in so close that for an insane moment Harry wondered if the man was about to kiss him.

“Dumbledore may be singing your praises right now, boy,” he hissed, “but bear in mind that _I know what you did_. I may not be able to do anything about it—can’t send the masses into hysterics—but I expect to win this election, and as Minister I promise there will be _no forgiveness_ for Dark wizards.”
Harry’s mind spun in the same confused circle as the man drew back and glared down his nose at him. “The law is the law, Mr. Aberforth, and it will be our sword and shield in this war. You’ve wriggled out of taking responsibility for your actions, but don’t expect such good fortune to protect you again, should you continue down this path.”

With that, the man straightened his robes imperiously, turned on his heel, and strode off.

Thoroughly baffled, it took Harry a moment to realise that Lily Evans had been standing behind Crouch. She stared at him with wide eyes.

“What the hell was that all about? Crouch never liked me, but that was bloody mental!”

Lily’s mouth dropped open, but it took her a few moments to respond. “What? Oh, he—he hates the Dark Arts.” She seemed to fumble for words. “He’s been pretty…zealous since the Invasion. His wife, you see.”

That Harry most certainly didn’t see must have been obvious as Lily rushed to explain.

“She was one of the Imperiused who…didn’t make it out. I think it hit him pretty hard that he was working so much that he didn’t even notice she was missing. I guess the Auror who arrested her in one of the last attacks was new and recorded her maiden name by mistake, so with all the confusion…” Lily trailed off.

Harry could almost hear Dalcop’s sobs the night he’d learned his own wife had been arrested.

He swore under his breath, all his anger at the man’s behaviour bleeding away into pity. “But still, what’s that got to do with me?”

The young woman frowned. “Well, I mean, come on, Harry. You did use the Killing Curse, and it’s supposed to be unforgivable. Crouch wants to be Minister and intends to take a hard stance against all the Dark Arts. By law you should be in Azkaban, but since we can’t let the public know that You-Know-Who survived a Killing Curse…” She shrugged awkwardly, avoiding his eyes.

For a moment, his mind went blank.

“Bugger.”

And then a cold, numbing terror crept over him. With everything that had happened, it hadn’t even occurred to him that he could actually be in trouble for using the Killing Curse against Voldemort.

“What,” he croaked through suddenly dry lips, “what do you think? About me and—and Azkaban?”

“I think you did the right thing,” she answered without a trace of hesitation. “I don’t like that spell any more than anyone else, but you could have ended it all if—if He hadn’t done whatever he did. And…” Lily tugged at a lock of her hair. “And I know that most of the Order agrees with me. Even Moody. But you’re going to need to watch out for Crouch.”

“Yeah. I mean, thanks Lily. Really.” His voice sounded fainter than he would have liked. Suddenly all he wanted was to go back to his bed and sleep for another month.

His mother’s counterpart watched him with a strangely careful expression. “How are you feeling? Are you completely healed now?”
“Huh? Oh, no. This is the first time Poppy’s actually let me out.” He gave her a wan smile. “But I’ll be fine.”

Lily arched an eyebrow but didn’t push further. “Well…I know you have an appointment with Albus.” She nodded a polite farewell.

As she moved to leave and he made for the spiral staircase, her voice rang through the corridor with surprising firmness. “We’ll talk again, Harry. Soon. When you’re healthy.”

“Sure,” he shrugged. “Later, Lily.”

xoxoxox

29 August, 1979

Harry surveyed his room for any last-minute possessions he’d overlooked.

The copies of the Daily Prophet scattered on his bed caught his eye.

Crouch Crushes Opposition! one headline proclaimed. New Minister vows harsh penalties for those who would threaten our world!

Another edition assured that All Ministry Employees to be Examined for Dark Marks! “We must roust You-Know-Who’s supporters from every level of our society,” says Minister Crouch.

He chewed his lip. Barty Crouch Senior might be a bastard of sorts, but he was still a right sight better than Selwyn, and probably loads better than Fudge had been.

The image of the grinning Sirius Black of this world slowly morphed into the gaunt and hollowed godfather he’d known in his own.

But we’ll have to be on the lookout for people just getting chucked into Azkaban.

“Leaving then?” a gruff voice asked from the doorway.

Harry smiled. “Yeah. Poppy gave me the go-ahead this morning.”

Argus Filch, face sour as always, shuffled in, eyeing the small stack of books on Harry’s bed. “So…you becoming a scholar or something?”

“Hardly,” he said. “Or, well, kind of? Albus asked me to help figure out what Voldemort’s done to himself.”

Filch looked unimpressed.

Harry shrugged. “Evil git tried to steal my soul and all.”

The man sputtered. “That’s what happened? Blimey O’Reilly…you might have mentioned that earlier!”

“Oh. Sorry. It’s kind of hard to work into most conversations.”

This earned him an actual laugh as Filch studied one of the texts. “What the hell kind of language is this, anyhow?”

Well shite.
“Er…It’s in Parseltongue, actually. You know, um, snake language?” Harry bit his lip and idly pet Mrs. Norris, who’d jumped on the bed to investigate the fuss. “See, we know that Voldemort said some sort of incantation, but we couldn’t hear it, even when we went into Albus’ pensieve…And since Voldemort’s a Parselmouth, Albus wondered if maybe the spell was a Parseltongue spell. So I’ve got to read all these and see if anything pops out.”

*Please don’t think I’m evil.*

Filch studied him. “You speak it then?”

He nodded mutely, waiting.

“Snakes say anything interesting?”

“Er…not really. That I know of, at least.”

The older man scrunched his face in thought. “Seems kind of a pointless talent then, doesn’t it?”

Harry blinked. “Yeah…Actually, yeah it really does, most of the time.”

Filch grunted and leafed through the book.

He couldn’t take it anymore. “Aren’t you going to worry I’m evil or something?”

“Why the ruddy hell would I do that? So what if you speak the same damn language that Dark Lord does? Bloke speaks English too, doesn’t he?”

Harry couldn’t have stopped his smile if he’d tried. “Thanks Argus.” He grabbed the texts and shoved them into his bag. “When Albus found out he was convinced I was Voldemort’s bloody *kid*. I’ve been trying to keep it quiet.”

“Wizards.” Filch’s cackle made it clear what he thought of his boss’s assumption. “Well, take care of yourself, Harry. Don’t want to see you all mostly-dead and stupid in here again, you hear me?”

“I hear you. And thanks…for staying with me and all. You come down to the Head soon, yeah?”

“I wi—”

“Hey kid, ready to go?” They both turned as Doc bounded into the room and came to a screeching halt. “Oh. Hello, Mr. Filch. Um. Sir.”

Harry bit back a grin. Doc looked like nothing more than a guilty schoolboy.

The caretaker snorted at the ‘sir,’ but otherwise ignored him. He left the room with a muttered, “Later Harry,” Mrs. Norris on his heels.

Doc shook his head. “Still can’t believe you tamed ol’ Filch. Anyhow, you ready to walk home?”


“Oh. Well, yes, we could…but, I mean—that is—er—fresh air and all.”

Harry stared at him.

Doc shifted awkwardly. “Yeah, see, you know…Oh, hell with it!” he snapped. “Guin wants a good liar, she should’ve come herself. They want you to walk so they have time to sort all the last minute
details for your party. They’re still waiting on the lads and ladies from Chincherd’s brothel to arrive —"

Harry reared up, but Doc pushed on “—Of course I told them you wouldn’t like it, but the fellas were dead set. Besides, they just invited the ones that were off tonight to come and have fun. And Guin’s trying to fix the charms for the lights she conned off some Muggle ‘discotalk’ place, and the boys had to go beg Tom at the Leaky to sell us a few extra cases of Steaming, and…”

Harry started laughing weakly.

“Oh come on, kid, it’ll be a good time,” Doc grinned. “And you know nothing brings in business like a party! I think Rosie’s even closing the ‘Sticks so she can come. Think of the coin we’ll be raking in!”

Surrendering with reluctant smile, Harry let his friend grab his bag and walk him home.

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is a nod to Pink Floyd’s iconic 1979 song “Comfortably Numb,” which was being recorded at around the same time as this chapter’s action.

**On Harry repeatedly calling Fabian “Ron”:** In case you are curious why no one makes a big deal of this, in part of a cut scene Albus explains it: *Albus paused and looked at Harry with sympathetic eyes. “You likely do not remember it, but one of the first times you returned to partial consciousness you were quite agitated and claimed that your body wasn’t your own. You kept claiming that things were ‘wrong.’ I would venture that such a feeling aligns with the forced reunion of soul and body after an unnatural separation.”* So essentially they thought he was saying “Wrong!” when he said “Ron!”

**On Umbridge’s cameo:** Yes, the pink-clad pro-Selwyn witch is of course Dolores Umbridge. Don’t get excited, she’s not really a part of this story, but I couldn’t resist the opportunity to both squish poor Harry between an assault of pink and purple, and to have Umbridge come off worse in a passive-aggressive spat with a Divination professor.

**Next on The Second String:** It’s the autumn of 1979 in Chapter 35, “All the Dearly-Born.” And yes, I’m a bastard for avoiding Lily this chapter; I promise she’ll be a central part of 35.

*Also, please note that between my health and my job, I’m in a bad way for time. I’d like to post 35 on schedule in two weeks, but there may well be a delay.*

Finally, **huge thanks the wonderful AverageFish, who beta-read the first scenes in this chapter** (check out their two time-travel stories—FFN author ID: 8207725).
The rest has been unbeta-ed. I apologize for any mistakes.
All the Dearly-Born

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XXXV. All the Dearly-Born

2 September, 1979

Small and wrinkly.

Harry stared down at the bundle in his arms, a person who hadn’t been in the world for a full twenty-four hours yet.

S’at all you can think? Small and wrinkly? Ab’s voice sounded amused.

Kind of red as well? Harry thought back.

He smiled at the impossibly tiny fingers that grasped his own.

Brilliant, though.

“Lad, stop hogging the tyke,” Pel chastised.

“Give us all a go!” Hagrid added.

A dozen of the Hog’s regulars were clustered around the newborn, among them several drunks, a half-giant, and a few Dark creatures.

“Oh, just look at you,” Panty the Welsh vampire cooed when Harry handed the baby over. “And a fine grip, too.”

Doc grinned broadly. “Well, he’s my son, after all! And a stubborn one at that. I think Guin’s still a bit arsed he took more than two days to finally give it up and come meet us!”

Harry shook his head. His friend was smiling so much it was a wonder he hadn’t pulled a muscle. “Drinks all around in her honour then! On the house!”

Loch moved behind the bar to start pulling pints.

When Harry had returned to the Head a few days before, he’d found not only a raucous welcome back party, but also a new employee.

He’d waved away Doc’s fumbled apology—it wasn’t as though the Dearborns could have actually consulted him that summer—and happily welcomed the werewolf. Given that Harry’d been out of commission and Guin’s due date had been rapidly approaching, there was no way Doc could have kept the place running on his own. Loch was a perfect replacement; he knew the Head and already got on with the regulars.

And his scones are almost as good as Guin’s.

Technically, of course, it was illegal for werewolves to come into contact with any food or beverages
marked for wizarding consumption. There were also a slew of Ministry forms and processes one was supposed to complete before attempting to hire a werewolf for any job...

Harry’d thought very seriously about all this for a good almost-minute before deciding he simply didn’t care.

Drinks in hand, the pub raised their glasses as one. “To Guin!” Loch grinned.

“To Guin!” came the thundering response.

As they drank deeply, the voice of the woman in question filtered down from above, aided by a Sonorous Charm.

“Ta, boys, but maybe it’s best to belt up a bit and let the lady sleep?”

They immediately fell silent.

Sanguini chuckled.

“So whadaya namin’ him then, Doc?” Dalcop eventually asked in a low tone. Harry glanced at him in surprise--he hadn’t heard the man say anything in the week since he’d returned to the Head.

Harry closed his eyes. Dalcop hadn’t taken the loss of his wife Vera well. As Guin told it, the man had retreated into himself, a condition made all the worse by the disappearance of the Ministry. There were no lifts for him to maintain in Hogwarts, so he’d taken to spending his days entirely at the Head, deep in his cups.

“I just don’t think he knows how to forgive himself,” Guin had explained. “After all, they Imperiused people they thought wouldn’t be missed.”

And that was the worst part, Harry knew. Dalcop hadn’t really noticed Vera being gone. Sure, their marriage had never seemed very...warm, but he could only imagine the guilt the older man had to be shouldering.

Watching Dalcop regarding the baby with a sad little smile, Harry held back a sigh. Today was a day for rejoicing, after all.

“Rhys. Rhys Dearborn, after Guin’s dad.”

“A noble name, darling,” Sanguini approved. “And hardly as cumbersome a praenomen as ‘Caradoc.’”

Doc summoned a head of garlic from the kitchen and lobbed it at the smirking vampire before turning to Harry. “And you’ll be godfather, yeah?”

“What? Me?”

I'm only eighteen!

When the hell did I become a responsible adult?

“’Course. Natural choice, aren’t you? Plus you’ll be getting as little sleep as the rest of us; might as well have a title for it, don’t you think?” Doc grinned, but there was a tinge of apprehension in his voice.

Harry blinked as he looked around his pub, a warmth cresting in his chest.
It suddenly occurred to him that they were gathered around the table where Ab had died. The memory still ached to his bones, but the hurt was not without a sad sort of sweetness. *Horrible things happened here.*

*But so did good things. And now there’s another one.*

Harry bit his lip.

“Yeah. Yeah, Doc, I’d be honoured.”

Beaming, Doc slapped him on the back so hard he nearly lost his balance.

“I’d say this calls for another round, eh boys?” Pel grinned.

Loch shook his head. “You think that everything calls for another round.”

xoxoxox

**13 September, 1979**

“Guin, love, you rest a bit. I’ll take Harry.”

She glared at her husband. “Rest a bit?” Guin hissed. “The moment you leave, Rhys will wake up and ‘rest’ will be a pipedream. *I’m* taking Harry. I could use an hour or two of being somewhere else.”

Harry shuffled between the pair. “I don’t need either of you—”

“Shut up, Harry,” they snapped before clapping their hands over their mouths, eyes on Rhys.

The newborn slept on, nestled in a little cot by the bar. All three sighed *very quietly* in relief.

Rhys had spent the first few days of his life lolling about in blissful silence.

A week later he’d apparently decided that the Head could do with a fair bit more noise. Tempers were getting…frayed.

*That reminds me—I need to order more coffee beans. A lot more.*

“’Course you should go, love,” Doc acquiesced under the force of Guin’s glare.

“Seriously, I don’t need a bloody bodyguard,” Harry muttered. “I’m not some defenceless kid—”

The Dearborns rounded on him. “You’re still not completely healed and you don’t even have your own wand,” Guin whispered. “Until you’re better, we aren’t going to let you traipse around London without someone watching your back!”

*This is pointless.* “Fine, fine, whatever.”

As Guin grabbed her bag, Harry caught Doc looking about the bar, wild-eyed and clearly panicking. “Wait! What—what do I need to do? Should I—I mean, I don’t—what if he cries or—”

She cupped his cheek. “Calm down, you ridiculous, wonderful oaf. You’ll handle it.”

“But—but—what if he—or if he—”

Gulping, Doc looked at his son and nodded.

xoxoxox

It was a lovely autumn day, and Guin was nearly skipping down the street, exulting in her first break from motherhood. She didn’t seem to notice the places that bore the scars of the Diagon attack earlier that summer, or those buildings which now were nothing but ash.

They weren’t half-way to Ollivander’s when fretting replaced gallivanting.

“Doc can handle being alone with the baby, right?”

... 

“Do you think Rhys misses me? Maybe I shouldn’t have left him. He’s not even two weeks old…”

... 

“Oh Merlin, Harry, am I bad mum? I am, aren’t I?”

She continued to worry well into the wand shop and was bouncing with nervousness by the time he tried what must have been his twentieth wand. Meanwhile, much like it had seven years earlier, Harry’s stomach felt like it was filling with lead.

What if none of them work for me?

What if being a dimension traveller affects all this?

What if—

He gripped Will Armstrong’s wand, currently lodged in his pocket, and reminded himself that it had worked for him well enough. Nevertheless, he was growing desperate to find Will’s fiancé and return it to her. She might not even know he died, for fuck’s sake! But I can’t leave myself defenceless either.

“I do love a customer with fussy magic.” Ollivander’s smile was all edges when he handed Harry what must have been the thirtieth wand.

Guin grumbled something about child abandonment.

By the fiftieth wand Harry was sweating through his robes.

“You’re the one who fought the Dark Lord in the Invasion, aren’t you? You lost your wand then, I presume.” The wandmaker didn’t wait for an answer, his strange eyes fixed on him as Harry wondered how the hell the man knew all that. “What did you say it was?”

Shite.

When he’d been eleven, Ollivander had made quite the to-do over his wand.

Lie.

“Hawthorn and unicorn hair.”

The old man regarded him for a long moment. “I do not take offense at deceptions, but I am insulted by preposterous ones.”
“I’ll bear that in mind,” Harry responded through gritted teeth.

“So, you lost your wand fighting You-Know-Who,” Ollivander murmured, completely ignoring him. “I wonder…” Without another word he tottered off into the back of his shop, returning a few minutes later with an obviously unfinished wand.

Though the shape was still blocky and rough, Harry recognized his wand the moment it touched his skin. Familiar warmth, familiar hum of power, but there was something...different.

Wait. Is it...is it laughing at me?

He barely kept from gasping as he realized that his wand was sending flashes of childlike amusement through his system that tingled like little electric shocks. I’ll be damned, it’s laughing at me.

Ollivander watched with a quirked eyebrow and smug grin. “Ah, that’s the one for you then. Mind that you take a firm hand with it. Young wands tend to be flighty.”

The power of his wand giggled through his magic, and Harry couldn’t help a giddy chuckle.

“All that’s left is a bit of cosmetic work. If you’ll give me some time, I can finish it off for you,” the wandmaker interrupted. “It’s quite curious. I just received the phoenix feather I used in it earlier this summer,” he frowned. “A fussy donator, that one. I rather expected it to take years to find a proper match, but given your past…”

Harry swallowed a laugh. You don’t know the half of it.

He absently patted Guin on the knee as she groaned, “We’re never getting back. I’m a terrible mother.”

Hours later, he left her at the Head and arranged to have _Dogweed and Deathcap_ send an anonymous fruit basket to Fawkes.

xoxoxox

14 September, 1979

The next day Harry stood before a tidy but aging apartment building in Stratford, East London, barely noticing the rain pelting against his umbrella charm.

Part of him really wished he hadn’t found the place so easily. All he’d had to go on were the names ‘William Armstrong,’ ‘Marina,’ and ‘Dean,’ which the boggart Marina had called Will during the Ministry Invasion.

But Marina Halloway had hung posters begging for information on her fiancé Dean Armstrong’s whereabouts from London to York.

And now I’m here to tell her that the man she loved was a wizard and died in a war.

Deep breath.

He knocked on the door.

xoxoxox

Their tea had long grown cold, but Harry kept talking and Marina Halloway kept listening. He could see her face cycle through the expected range of emotions—disbelief, anger, horror, despair—as he...
revealed the existence of magic and did his best to gently tell her of her husband’s secret life and death.

When he got to the Ministry Invasion, tears started to streak down her face, but she made no move to interrupt.

“…I wanted to save him, but it all happened so fast and he was…he was just gone.” Harry couldn’t look at her.

His words felt like hollow things.

“I had to keep fighting, though, and I got hurt at the end of the battle. I was in coma all summer.”

He wanted to slap himself. *Bastard. You’re just trying to make sure she doesn’t blame you for having to go months without knowing what happened to him! This isn’t about you, though, is it.*

Marina watched him silently through her tears, one hand on her stomach.

“Because a magic artefact was stolen, the Ministry is unreachable. So…” *I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

“So we weren’t able to recover any of the bodies of the people who fell there. I—I’m sorry.” He took Will’s wand out of his pocket. “But this was his wand. It saved my life. I think he’d want you to have it, ma’am.”

She made no move to take it.

Finally, Marina lifted her chin proudly. “So you are saying that my fiancé was really a wizard fighting in a magical war as some sort of vigilante? That everything he told me about his past was a lie?”

The tone cast a chill over the room.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But I know he wanted to tell you, he just…couldn’t find the right time, I guess. And I know that more than anything he wanted to protect you and the baby.”

Her dark eyes were hard and bright. “He should have trusted me with the truth.”

The inadequacy of his words bit into him again. “Yeah…probably. And I know it has to be awful to find out he lied. But he did it because he was scared and he loved you. I didn’t…I actually didn’t really know Will that well,” he confessed with a guilty pang. “We fought together, yeah, but aside from that, our lives were separate. Still, though, it was always you he talked about, you he thought about after a night fighting them.”

He couldn’t get the bloodied Marina-boggart out of his head as the real Marina stared at him. “You two being hurt was his greatest fear and—” Harry shook his head. “Will—Dean—was just…he was just a really good man who tried to do what was right. He died doing that.”

She slowly took the wand from him and held it gingerly with her fingertips. “What…what was his real name?”

“William Armstrong. I think his middle name was Dean.”

Marina nodded absently. “And my child?”

Harry blinked.

“My child—will it be, um, magical then? Will people come after us because of that?”
“Oh, I—” Looking into her eyes, Harry suddenly felt as though reality were twisting.

*Oh my God.*

The dark skin, the kind eyes.

‘Dean.’

His stomach lurched as he did the math.

*It’s Dean Thomas. She’s Dean’s mum.*

... 

*Will was Dean’s dad.*

His breath came in sharp pant. *How did I not notice before? Dean even told me that his biological father disappeared and that his mum eventually got remarried.*

*Christ, my Dean never knew his dad was a wizard. Or that he was a hero.*

He stared at her stomach, thoroughly boggled. *My roommate is in there...*

Marina was looking at him oddly, and it was all he could do to repress his shock and continue. “Yeah, uh, yeah it’s really likely your so—you're kid will be magical.” Thoughts and plans blurred through his mind. “But I can cast some charms on your house that’ll alert me if anyone magical comes here, and I can give you something you can use to contact me.”

*I know how to make the Nine’s dog tags. No one will notice if I make just one more pair for us.*

“And...well, if you need help with the baby, you can contact me, especially if it’s magical and you’re having problems. And when the baby’s old enough, I can come and tell them about their dad, if that’s okay, that is...” *Christ, I’m babbling. Shut up, Harry!*

His mouth showed no signs of listening to his brain.

“Two of the people I work with just had a baby too. They’re sure to have extra clothes and things by the time you’ll need them...”

“Yes, thank you,” Marina cut off his prattling, *and thank Merlin for that.*

Twenty minutes later he’d covered her home with every protection charm he knew and was promising to send her a dog tag.

Throughout it all Marina remained quiet, her expression far away and eyes clouded. As he made to leave, Harry was once again struck by the insufficiency of his explanations. *I have to make sure she understands, that she doesn’t hate him.*

“Ms. Halloway... Will was fighting for his family, and for people who couldn’t defend themselves. I know he lied to you, but he...yeah, he was the sort of person that I wish everyone in the wizarding world would be. Most of them probably didn’t even notice he existed because he’s Muggleborn, but...” *Dammit, I have to find the right words!...but they should have. Because he was brave enough to stand against something truly evil. I’m...I’m proud to have fought with him.*

The young woman stared at him, her expression blank. Finally, she nodded and reached out to shake his hand.
“Thank you for telling me, Harry.”

It was the best he could do for Will, and for Marina and Dean, but the hollow pit in his stomach remained long after he’d Apparated home.

*They deserve better.*

xoxoxox

16 September, 1979

A fire was crackling merrily, Fawkes was dozing on his perch, and Harry was trying hard not to go mad.

He gritted his teeth and turned another page in the last of the Parselscript books.

*I can do this. I have to do this.*

*If it helps us defeat Voldemort, it’s worth the pain in the arse.*

The thick, mouldering tome wasn’t really a spell book at all—not that Albus could have known.

While the other texts he’d gone through had been filled with all manner of spells and rituals, some surprisingly benign, some as horrific as he’d expected, it seemed that the author of this book, one Morsus Gaunt, had instead spent much of his time inventing the heinous crime that was Parseltongue love poetry.

Harry was no literary critic, but after three hundred pages of tortured metaphors—*and thank God it just looks like English to me*—he found himself hoping Morsus had died a lonely virgin.

Unfortunately, Gaunt had proven to be truly evil, since every so often he’d jotted down spells in between various odes, so Harry couldn’t just chuck the damn book into the fire.

*Bastard.*

When an excited Albus burst finally burst into his office half an hour later, Harry could have hugged him just for the distraction.

“Ah, Harry! I’m sorry for my tardiness, but a situation arose that required my presence.” Dumbledore flicked his wand and a tea service appeared on his desk. “Alastor and Edgar captured two Death Eaters, and I led the interrogation. I believe I may have learned something pertinent to our research.”

*Our research?* Harry nearly rolled his eyes. *Honestly, he does the thinking and I do the nodding.* Still, after hours of love poetry, he appreciated the gesture.

The old wizard heaved himself into his chair with a deep sigh. “I’ve long suspected that Tom has become practiced in the mind arts, but now…” He shook his head. “What I learned today suggests he’s become far more adept than I ever imagined. Einer Rowle claimed, under Veritaserum, that Tom’s mastery is such that he can force visions upon others. Visions that torture them into such madness that they believe the horrors in their minds are reality.”

*That is seriously not good.*

“Well, shit,” Harry summarised.

“Indeed,” the headmaster smiled ruefully. “But I now wonder if his imitation of the Dementor’s
effect is a modified application of the mind arts. Perhaps he was creating the illusion of their presence not in reality, but in our minds alone.”

Harry frowned. “That…that doesn’t seem on. I mean, when I’m near Dementors, all my bad memories…it’s like I’m in them again. It happened at both the battle at Gringotts and on Level Eleven.”

“Yes, Dementors evoke our most painful memories, but an exceptional Legilimens can likewise force us relive them. If Tom has become a such a master, it’s possible that his mental attacks combined with other spells—to make us feel the chill and despair of their presence and so on—could be mistaken for a Dementor’s presence.”

“Okay…” This was all way above Harry’s level, but… “Wait—our patronuses worked! So it couldn’t just be some mind trick—”

Dumbledore beamed. “Very good, Harry. That was my initial objection as well. But what is a patronus but a mental defence given form and substance?”

*Oh for the love of*— “You’re going to have to dumb it down a bit there, Albus,” he admitted dryly.

A few of the portraits snickered.

The headmaster shushed them. “Although it is taught as a charm, Harry, the Patronus spell has its foundation in the mind arts. Some believe that the reason Dementors evoke our worst memories is so that our more positive ones are left undefended, and therefore are more easily obtained. After all, such memories are the first to be taken from prisoners in Azkaban. The Patronus Charm was developed as a means of concentrating upon and thus protecting them.”

With a flick of his wand and a muttered incantation, Albus’ phoenix patronus shimmered into being.

The man watched it with a small smile. “Such an elegant union of magics, isn’t it Harry? Our focus on happy memories creates a mental defence against Dementors, while the incantation generates an external defender, a weapon—our patronus.”

Harry’s head was swimming. It all seemed to make sense, so far as he could tell, but something about it all just felt off.

“As to Tom’s creation of the effect,” Albus continued, “I believe the focus required for the charm would likely serve as an effective, if inadvertent, mental guard against such an attack.”

“But why would Voldemort even bother to invent something like this?”

Albus raised an eyebrow. “Was it not effective at Gringotts? Didn’t it weaken us significantly at the Ministry?”

*Fair point.*

“So…if you’re right, what does that mean for us?”

“I am one of the few who could teach others Occlumency—a way of protecting against Legilimency. The Unspeakables could also, but our recent meetings have not gone…well.”

“Really?”

The headmaster frowned. “The loss of all their precious treasures in the Department of Mysteries has
left them floundering. They were quite clear that they will play no part in this war until their resources have been restored.”

Oh poor them.

“And it would take years for pupils to stand a chance against someone like Tom,” Albus mused, sipping his tea. “No, the best defence remains the Patronus Charm. I shall speak with Barty about arranging lessons for all who are interested. Especially those joining the militias.”

Harry cocked his head. “Militias? What are you—"

“If you’d attend Order meetings you’d know,” Albus shot back sternly, though his eyes twinkled. I refuse to feel guilty about skipping them.

“I said I’d fight with the Order, not that I’d join it,” Harry reminded him. “And besides, I went to a few, and they were all—I mean…people talked a lot, but it didn’t seem like anything got done!”

The last meeting he’d attended had been two hours of variations on “we don’t know what Voldemort is planning.” Harry had better things to do with his time. Like read Parselscript books. Or feed his goats. Or sleep.

Albus chuckled. “A criticism I cannot refute. At any rate, our new Minister is arranging for neighbourhood watch groups to be stationed in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, Godric’s Hollow, and a few other locations. Their training under Auror supervision begins in a few weeks, I believe.”

Harry made a mental note to look into the Hogsmeade group.

“Even if my theory about Tom is wrong, it can only be a good thing if more people become proficient with the Charm,” the headmaster murmured. The man shook his head and turned back to Harry. “But we still must figure out the spell he used on you, not to mention how Tom survived your Killing Curse. Have you had any luck?”

“Not with the spell, no.” Harry bit his lip. “There’s nothing even close to it in any of the books. But for the not dying part…” He rummaged in his pack for an ancient, hand-written text that seemed to drip malice. “In this one there’s this ritual that may…Yeah, here it is. Something called the ‘Ouroborian Pact.’ It’s—honestly, it’s pretty awful.” He looked at the drawings with a grimace. “Basically, it’s supposed to guarantee ‘renewal and rebirth,’ but if you want it, you have to…erm—remove all your skin and then do some alchemical thing with it that I didn’t understand at all.”

Albus peered at the illustrations and alchemical symbols with interest. “Fascinating…”

“It doesn’t really say if a person who does the ritual can just get right back up after a Killing Curse like Voldemort did, but I thought, you know, maybe worth looking at?”

Over tea and biscuits, the pair spent the next half hour discussing whether Voldemort’s appearance could be the result of flaying himself, before finally rejecting the theory and resuming their reading.

When Lily appeared to remind Albus of some appointment or another, Harry gratefully shut the book of Parselscript poetry and took his leave.

That’s enough battling Voldemort for one day.

xoxoxox
Harry’s mind was on feeding the goats as he opened the stable door later that evening, only to stop dead in surprise.

“Oh! Hi Lily…”

His mother’s counterpart was perched stiffly on his old hay bed, staring at him.

“…Can I help you with something?”

The staring continued. A red flush coloured Lily’s cheeks.

“Er, Lily?”

“Harry. We need to talk.” The whispering voice was harsher than he’d ever heard from her. “I wanted to wait until you were better, and you are now, so—” She cut herself off, taking a deep breath. “You are going to tell me exactly how we are related.”

“What?

His mind went blank as the blood drained from his face.

Shit–how does she–I need to come with something–shit

All he managed was, “What…what are you talking about?…Are you feeling alri—”

A flick of her wrist and something small landed at his feet.

The candlelight glinted off the Nines-issued dog tag laying innocently in the hay.

“Vox Familiae,” she whispered.

His stomach sank.

“The Call of Family. A spell that can only connect blood relatives.” Her hands shook, but her voice did not. “That’s the tag you gave me. The match to the one you gave my mother, the one Petunia used to call for help, the one that you heard and answered.”

“We–we–” Dammit, think of something! “We modified the spell, Lily,” he said, thinking fast. “It could reach anyone with magical blood.”

God, that’s so weak.

“Well then,” she said too crisply, too brightly. “I suppose that could explain it.” The disgusted look she shot at him spoke volumes. “Funny, though. Did you know I had the Prewetts make a clock for James as a wedding present?”

His confusion over the non-sequitur was smothered by the staggering realization that his parents were married now.

“You–you’re married? That’s, wow, that’s really great! When—”

Lily arched her eyebrow in a way that fleetingly reminded him of Severus Snape.

“Hmm. As I was saying, I had a clock made.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a handsome timepiece. “It’s a strange little thing. It’s only supposed to have hands for myself and James. But as you can see, there’s an extra one. There’s only supposed to be new hands when we have children.”
“This summer the third hand spent quite a long time pointed at ‘Mortal Peril’,” she continued, her eyes boring into him. “Then right around the time you, coincidentally, started improving, it switched to ‘Hospital.’ And tonight it moved from ‘School,’ where it was during the Order meeting, to ‘Hospital,’ to ‘Traveling’…and then, just as you came in the door, it moved to ‘Home.’

Oh fuck. Oh fuck fuck fuck.

Her smile was too sharp. “So tell me, Harry Aberforth, who the hell are you to me?”

He could only stare into her flashing eyes and hope the voice of Ab or Caffrey Burke or Hermione would pipe up in his mind with some advice.

There was nothing.

When he opened his mouth to say something—he had no idea what—Lily’s eyes narrowed. “Whatever you’re about to say had better not be a lie.”

His mouth closed with an audible clack of teeth.

Her words stole his breath and left behind an ache that stung all the more because, well, whatever he’d been about to say would probably have been bullshite.

I don’t—

I don’t know what to do.

Suddenly Harry was just so damn over everything. Over lying and hiding, over fighting on behalf of a future that would never exist.

Lily said nothing as Harry waged a silent war with himself, hacking his way through the knotted jungle of anxieties that had taken root in his mind and flourished on a diet of fear and confusion.

One thought, however, rose above the others.

I don’t want to lie. Not to her.

Fuck it.

He sat heavily on another block of hay, buckling under the force of the realization that he was going to tell her the truth. It was mental, it was stupid, it went against his promise to Ab…but he just didn’t want lie to Lily Potter, even if she wasn’t his Lily Potter.

Years before, Ab and Pel had told him that he was being selfish for telling them his secret.

Maybe they were right.

They were probably right.

…

But maybe, a small voice inside him said, maybe I’ve earned the right to be selfish. Just one more time.

Harry shot to his feet. “I’ll explain everything. Just give me five minutes.”
Two redheads were glaring at him.

*Maybe this was a really awful idea.*

“Erm…can I get either of you anything to drink?”

Two pairs of eyes narrowed.

*Yeah, this was probably definitely an awful idea.*

Goat butted his leg, looking up at him blandly.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. If he was going to break his promise to Ab, Harry figured he might as well see if the truth could also win Gideon back, too. So, heart in his hands, he’d written a quick note, telling the man that he missed him and begging him to come to the pub so that he could tell him everything right now. He’d folded the parchment into a little bird and sent it towards the clock shop.

Part of him hadn’t expected Gideon to come. Part of him had panicked when the man actually did, Gid’s face hard and his silence impenetrable.

*But he came.*

He took a deep breath. “Okay… So, I’ll tell you the truth. Lily figured out something was up, see, and I figured if I had to break my promise to Ab,” he tried to ignore Gideon’s sharp look at that, “...I may as well also tell the person I’ve most wanted to. But please don’t interrupt. It’s...hard.”

His mother and ex-lover just looked at him.

“I…shit…yeah, Lily, you’re right. We’re related. Kind of. But not.” Harry awkwardly cleared his throat.

“My name is—or was—Harry Potter.”

Saying it—it was like some dam burst and he couldn’t stop. “I’m your son from the future, Lily. And from another dimension. So you’re not my mum, but kind of my mum. See, when I was fifteen I got Kissed by a Dementor—not that I’m a criminal!—it’s just I think that the Ministry was angry I said that Voldemort was resurrected, which was true, and then I woke up nineteen years in the past, but I thought it was my past. But then later I realised it wasn’t…it’s not my world at all.”

He chanced a questioning look.

Lily and Gideon were staring.

“You did tell us not interrupt,” she said mildly, arching her eyebrow. “Though you may want to try to repeat that a bit more clearly.”


With a deep breath, he started over. “My parents were Lily and James Potter and I was born in the summer of 1980…”

It was easier to talk if he didn’t look at them. With his eyes closed, he summarised that horrible Halloween and how he hadn’t learnt he was a wizard until his eleventh birthday. The rest he’d
truncated into a simple, “I went to Hogwarts and made really good friends, but the shade of Voldemort kept trying to get resurrected so I had to confront him a few times.”

He skipped over the Dursleys, Sirius and Pettigrew entirely.

His fourth year received a bit more attention, with a cursory treatment of the Triwizard Tournament, Voldemort’s resurrection, Crouch’s involvement, and Fudge’s disbelief.

Through it all, neither Lily nor Gideon made a sound. And telling them…telling them felt good.

“And then I went home for the summer and one night the Dementors came… I did try to fight them, I did, but I,” he choked on the words. “…I lost. And one Kissed me. It—it was really strange, actually.

“Oh, any way, I woke up just where I had been, but everything was different. When I realized it was 1976 I sort of freaked out. I thought I had time-travelled, you know, and I was really scared that I would change the future and write myself or my friends out of existence. So going to Hogwarts seemed like a bad idea, and I just ended up in Hogsmeade, and… I guess I figured living in the Forbidden Forest wasn’t really so bad.”

A snort from Lily.

“Well in my defence, I was fifteen and had just been Kissed by a Dementor! So yeah, I was a bit mental.” He huffed out a nervous little laugh at his own expense. “Anyway, I lived there until just before Christmas. That’s when Ab found me and took me to the Head. He assumed I was a squib. Since I didn’t want to get found out by the Ministry, it seemed a good enough way to avoid Hogwarts and all that. So I just…honestly, I just kind of went with it.”

He opened his eyes for a moment but couldn’t bring himself to look at the pair across from him. “I told Ab and Pel everything after the Macnair thing, and they made me swear never to tell anyone. Said that the Unspeakables would snatch me up and I’d never see daylight again.” He picked at his sweater as Lily swore under her breath.

“I believed them. I still do.” He shook his head, not wanting to think about the fact that he was breaking his oath. “Anyway, after that Ab and Pel taught me. Poppy figured out I was a wizard and taught me a bunch as well. Eventually I met someone here who died in the 1940s in my world, and we realized that I couldn’t have just time-travelled. That this wasn’t my world at all.”

Lily’s gasp was barely audible.

“So…so I could do things, change things, without destroying my past. And then Ab…” The words caught in his throat. “It’s kind of my fault, you see. The man who killed Ab was from my world. Barty Crouch Junior. The Dementor that Kissed him after the Tournament sent him here too, just way further back.”

With that he had to stop. I’ve told them enough anyway. “That’s most of it. The big stuff, at least. I... I swear it’s the truth.”

It took more bravery than he thought he had to look up at them. “What... what do you think? And are you going to tell anyone? I know should’ve made you take a vow but...” He gestured helplessly.

But I just want to be able to trust you.

Like I did Ab and Pel.
The pair watched him, their expressions inscrutable.

“So…” Lily began in a strangely calm voice. “You’re my son from the future of another dimension, one where I died?” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “And the first thing you did after getting sent here isn’t come to my house for help like any sane person, but run away to the bloody Forbidden Forest?”

She sounds like Molly Weasley, he thought, blinking back at her waspish tone.

“Um…well, no. Actually, I went to the Burrow first.”


“Their son Ron was my best mate in school. Molly and Arthur treated me really well, and I wanted a grown-up to help, I guess. But I realised when I saw them that I couldn’t drag them into my problems, so I left.”

“Rubbish! They don’t have a son named Ron.”

“They will,” Harry replied quietly. “Ron’s birthday is in March of 1980.” He quickly did the math, eyes widening. “Huh. I guess Molly’s pregnant already now. Oh, that’s weird.”

Gideon let out a ragged breath. “I—I can’t listen to this anymore.” Without another word he stood up, looked dazedly about the room, and walked out the door.

What? Why?

A rushing sound filled Harry’s ears as the door closed behind Gideon.

“He left,” he said blankly to Lily. “I told him the truth and he just left.”

She frowned. “I’ll be right back,” was all Lily said before heading up the staircase towards the public room.

Harry stared at the stable door.

He barely noticed when Lily came back and pushed a glass of Firewhiskey into his hands.

“I really didn’t think he’d leave,” he finally said in a hollow voice.

His mother’s counterpart shrugged awkwardly and gulped her own drink. “Give him time? I don’t think he’s the type to go blabbing but, I mean really, Harry, this is a lot to take in.”

“You seem to be handling it well enough.”

Her laugh had a wild, jagged edge to it. “No Harry, no I’m really not. I’m freaking out. I’m seriously losing it over here.” She smoothed her robes with shaking hands. “Or I will once the shock wears off.”

“Oh. Sorry?”

Again her laugh was close to hysterical, but still rather lovely. His nervous smile faltered when she cut off abruptly.

“Wait!” she exclaimed, jumping to her feet with a manic grin. “You’re from the future! You must be able to help us!”
“A different future, Lily, in a different world,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t know all that much about the war to begin with, and I’m pretty sure that a lot of it has happened differently here. That whole Dementor thing with Voldemort is definitely new. And, well, I’ve changed some things already,” he admitted. “I don’t know any more about what’s going to happen at this point than you do."

She sank back down and began chewing a strand of her hair. “Do you think James and I will still get killed? You said we were under the Fidelius, so we must have been betrayed.”

Harry shuddered, remembering how Pettigrew’s blood on his hands had left him cold. “I don’t—I can’t say you’re going to be fine since I don’t know this future, but...I’ve made sure that the person who betrayed you won’t be able to do it here.”

_Please don’t ask._

Lily looked at him with eyes as sharp and bright as chipped glass. “Who?”

_Dammit._

He sat very, very still.

_I don’t want to lie to her._

Harry swallowed. “Peter Pettigrew. He became a Death Eater spy.”

“Peter disappeared months ago,” she said slowly, her gaze never leaving his face. “Oh God… _What the fuck did you do, Harry?_”

Something about hearing his mother say ‘fuck’ spurred him into spilling the story of his third year, of Sirius’ escape and Peter’s betrayal.

“—Sirius and Remus wanted to kill him in the Shack, but I convinced them not to. I didn’t…I didn’t think my parents would want them to be murderers.” His laugh was bitter. “But Peter escaped that night, and a year later he was the one to bring Voldemort back. That’s…that’s what my mercy got us.”

Tears streamed down Lily’s face.

“When I realised he was here, I thought…I guess I thought that it’s a different world, and he hadn’t done anything yet. Maybe he’d make better choices? So I left him alone. But then,” he shook his head furiously, “shit, Lily, he was at the Dursleys that night. He’s the one who killed Vernon. I didn’t think anyone would believe me, so I waited until I had the chance…” The words dried up on his lips.

“What did you do, Harry?” she asked again, her voice even but her eyes wide.

“I captured him and forced him to tell me the truth. It was his initiation into the Death Eaters. He wasn’t…he wasn’t even _sorry._”

_She won’t be able to forgive this._ Harry steeled himself as best he could, though he knew it wouldn’t be enough.

“So I slit his throat and got rid of the body.”

Her eyes cut into his.
“You’re—you’re serious.” She blinked. “You really killed him.”

“I did. And I’m not sorry. I wish—”

Lily slammed to her feet, sputtering incoherently—though Harry picked up on some truly jaw-dropping obscenities. She paced the stable, her sparking wand startling the goats out of her way.

Harry’s instincts clamoured for him to take cover now, dammit! but he forced himself still.

“You—” she snarled, her glare venomous. “You let James—sleepless nights—they were like brothers, James didn’t know what happened! You let him hope, you bastard!”

Harry was on his feet without even realising it. “Dammit, Lily, I am sorry for the way I did it! I’m sorry you all had to deal with not knowing, I am! But I’m not sorry I killed him. Maybe I should have figured a way to tell you, I don’t know, but fuck it all, last time...last time you fucking trusted him and it got you killed and ruined my life!” A ragged sob tore through his chest, even as a corner of his mind reeled at the sudden knowledge that a small, young part of him blamed his parents for what had happened.

His shoulders sagged with sudden exhaustion. “You...they, my parents, they trusted the wrong man. And you’re...you’re good people. I wasn’t sure you’d do—you could do, what needed to be done. Not this time.”

Lily was watching him with hard eyes.

“So yeah, I’m not sorry I killed him, but I’d rather have you alive to hate me. What I did…” he trailed off, remembering Peter’s face, his nervous laugh. “What I did probably wasn’t good, I know that. But I swear to you that is was right.”

“You swear?” she snapped. “Would you really swear that you think you did the right thing? Would you make an Unbreakable Vow?”

Harry couldn’t find his breath.

“All I’ve done is lie to her. Of course she doesn’t trust me. ‘Yeah. Yeah, Lily, I would. I...I bet Pel’s upstairs. He can do the spell if that’s okay wi—”

Lily’s slumped onto the hay bed. “Bugger all, Harry,” she said wearily. “You can stop, I was bluffing. But...but it means something that you’re willing.” She rubbed her face before grabbing his half-finished Firewhiskey and downing it.

“Okay,” she finally said. “Okay, I think I need to go. I’m...Christ, this is a lot. Too much. I need some time. I’ll have questions—don’t you dare think you’re off the hook—but I...” she paused, her expression dazed. “I believe you. Dammit, I don’t want to, but I do. I just...this way too much right now..”

“Yeah. Sure,” Harry said quickly. “Are you...are you going to tell James?”

Lily’s jaw dropped. “Are you mad? Of course I’m not going to tell him! Finding out he has a son his own age is one thing, but that you killed Peter? No way. That’s some drama we don’t need in the middle of a bloody war!”

It was Harry’s turn to gape. “You’d lie to him? You’re okay with that?”

The woman huffed. “I’m Muggleborn, Harry,” she said, as though that explained everything. Her
eyes rolled at his uncomprehending look. “We’re used to keeping things from people. We’re all liars by law, you know that. Other than our immediate family, we can’t tell anyone out there anything about our lives. I’ve been lying to aunts and uncles and old school friends for years.”

“Oh. Huh.” Harry’d never thought of it that way. “Um, thanks. And...and what about Dumbledore? Will you tell him? He’s your boss and all.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I think you’re barmy for not trusting him. Albus isn’t going to throw you to the Unspeakables, for heaven’s sake.”

“But—”

“But I won’t tell him, unless it becomes life or death or something. It’s your business.” She put a tentative hand on his shoulder. “I won’t tell anyone.”

He gave a jerky nod. “Thanks.”

“Look, I have to go. I need to think.”

As the door closed behind her, Harry heard a softly muttered, “I have a son.”

He smiled.

xoxoxox

Sleep wasn’t going to happen.

Harry glanced at his clock—the one Gideon gave me.

Half-past two.

Yeah, sleep’s not going to happen.

Harry sighed and returned to staring blankly at his bedroom ceiling.

Tomorrow he’d make himself think about what he’d done. About breaking his promise to Ab, about Gideon’s face as he’d left the stable, about what it meant that Lily knew.

Oh, and I’ll have to tell Pel. Won’t that be fun?

But just for tonight, he’d let himself be numb.

The shadows on the ceiling scattered. It took Harry several seconds to realise that someone had opened his door.


“You’re up.”

Running a nervous hand through dishevelled hair, Gideon looked as haggard as Harry felt.

“Did you know me?”

It took a moment to riddle out the question.

“No, Gid. I mean…” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “I don’t think you…you made it through the first war in my world. I never met you, and Ron and the twins never mentioned you…or Fabian.
Neither did any of the other Weasleys. But your clock—they had your clock.”

The redhead released an explosive breath.

“Merlin, fuck. That’s so…” He shook his head as though to clear it. “So…so this thing we had, it wasn’t because of a weird crush you had on some middle-aged me?”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “The fuck? Yeah, no! That’s…that’s actually really creepy. The first time I saw you—any version of you—was when you came to the Head with Arthur when the twins were born. I swear.”

“Oh.”

Gideon swayed in the doorway. He didn’t come in, but he wasn’t leaving yet, either.

Harry’s heartbeat thrummed.

*Say something.*

“I miss you.”

That earned an angry snort, but Gideon did step into the room.

“You–!” he sputtered, his face flushed a furious red. “You–you’re–really irritating!”

*Huh?*

“And I still really like you, you lying irritating bastard!”

Harry’s lips were moving before his brain caught up with them. “You’re sending some really mixed signals here.”

Gideon sent him a withering glare.

“Erm, sorry.”

“I was content to figure you were just another lying berk, you know? And then you have to go and be all…!” The man huffed and flopped into the armchair near the door. “Decent? Understandable? Fuck, it’s annoying…” His snort was tinged with bitterness. “Well, except for the whole squib thing. That was ridiculous,” he muttered. “And seriously, Harry, the Forbidden Forest?”

He conceded the point with a shame-faced shrug.

Silence fell as Gideon scrunched his face in any direction but Harry’s, and Harry watched his flush slowly drain away.

*He’s not as mad as he wants to be.*

…

*And he likes me.*

“I’m sorry I lied to you,” he said softly. “I’m sorry I thought I had to.”

Gideon remained silent for some time, and Harry scrambled in vain to divine the magical words that would make everything better.
Finally, the redhead sighed. “I have questions. Tomorrow you’re going to answer them. Because you sure as hell didn’t tell us everything.”

“I will.”

“Okay then. Good.”

Neither moved.

“But now,” Gideon said, cleaving through the awkward silence, “now I’m tired and I want to go to bed.”

Harry’s mouth started moving, babbling nonsense niceties, *Yes, of course I understand, we’ll talk later* or some such rot. The other man simply rolled his eyes and slipped into the bed, his arm curling around Harry’s waist and drawing him close.

*Oh God.*

*He meant here.*

...  

*Yes!*

Half of Harry wanted to melt into the man and smile until his face cracked.

The other half was a complete idiot who couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

“So, yeah…this is great. Really great. But does this mean we’re back together, or—”

“Dunno. I just miss you.”

“You know, these are still mixed signals—”

Gideon grunted and flicked Harry’s ear. “I’ll go if you want, just say so. But right now I’m tired and trying very hard not to dwell on the fact that I’ve fucked James and Lily Potter’s unborn interdimensional baby.”

“Oh. Oh yeah, that does sound bad,” Harry admitted.

Don’t say it. Keep your mouth shut. Don’t say it.

“Cradle-robber.”

*Dammit.*

“Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“Do shut up.”

“Shutting up.” He nestled in closer.

“I stopped in at the Burrow,” Gideon murmured a few minutes later. “Molly’s pregnant. Due at the end of February.”
“Ron was never much for punctuality.” The smile on his face was starting to hurt, but Harry didn’t think he could stop grinning any time soon.

xoxoxox

21 September, 1979

Lounging in the workroom chair that had once been his chair, Harry watched Gideon carve minuscule runes on the massive wooden frame with exacting care.

A soft, lazy smile played on his lips as he waited for the other man to rest back on his heels and wipe his brow.

I hope he says yes to this.

The last four days had been among the most content in his life. He’d thought that things with Gideon would be strained and awkward, and they had been at first. The morning after he’d spilled his guts, he’d asked if Gideon would keep his secret, even from his family. It had felt as though his heart had forgotten to beat as the other man frowned to himself for long moments before finally shrugging.

“I won’t say anything. If they ask, I’ll tell them that you told me the truth, but that it’s none of their business. No need to lie.”

“Oh,” Harry said blankly. “But do you really think that Molly—”

Gideon rolled his eyes. “I’ll handle her.”

And that had been that.

The awkwardness had slowly bled away as Gideon spent the rest of that day relentlessly drawing stories about the Dursleys, his years at Hogwarts, Voldemort's return, whatever, out of him.

Gideon wasn’t always thrilled with his answers.

“I cannot believe that no one ever checked on you in that house!”

“You went after a basilisk alone? Twice? Fuck Harry, I can forgive when you were twelve, but why the hell didn’t you get help when you did it this year? What about me makes it seem like I wouldn’t want to be involved with that?”

But after those uncomfortable conversations, Harry found himself talking about the far less consequential, but nonetheless equally important, things that had never seemed to come up with Ab or Pel.

Evenings spent in the Common Room with Ron and Hermione.

Five a.m. Quidditch practices and hard-earned victories.

Summer days at the Burrow and Christmas Eves at Hogwarts.

It had been two days before, while he had been telling Gideon about how he made the Gryffindor team, that Harry had realised just how little of his past, how little of himself, he’d given to anyone in this new world, even Ab.

Sure, he’d made new memories with Ab, Gideon, and everyone at the Head, but he’d never let himself truly be both Harry Aberforth and Harry Potter around any of them.
Later that night, Gideon kissed him for the first time since they had broken up.

And, for the first time ever, it felt like Gideon was really kissing him.

*He’s really starting to know me now.*

. . .

*This is how you fall in love,* he’d thought.

Wrenching himself back to the present, Harry noticed that Gideon had finally finished his carving and was cocking a glance at him. “What’re you smiling about then?”

“Nothing,” Harry said, the lie made obvious by his growing grin. “Just that I like you knowing who I am. It’s very…nice.”

Gideon’s ears turned a pleased red. “You’re truly a wordsmith.”

“Oh, funny,” he snarked back, resisting the childish urge to stick his tongue out. “But seriously, I like it. And…I was wondering if you wanted to do something really important with me.”

“I thought we agreed to move more slowly this time and not just jump into putting our cocks in fun and exciting places.”

Harry conjured a pillow and smacked Gideon lightly on the head with it. “Not that, you wanker.” A moment later his smile bled into seriousness. “It’s just something I need to do. And I want to do it with you.”

Gideon sobered immediately. “What?”

“Wanna go meet Hermione?”

*xoxoxox*

Hermione Granger, it turned out, was about as interesting as any other two-day-old infant.

Especially one only spied through a window from across a street.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit! She’s all wrapped up!” Harry groused in a furious whisper, watching as the Doctors Granger cradled a lump swathed in yellow in their front room.

“I think I may have seen some hair?” Gideon offered as Hermione’s mother walked out of view, her daughter in her arms.

Harry grunted and flopped onto the kerb. “Don’t know what I expected, really.”

*You expected to see your Hermione and hear her talking about homework or Hogwarts: A History or elvish welfare or whatever.*

He shook his head, as though the movement could dispel his disappointment. “Anyway, we’re here to protect them, not just stare at them.”

Chanting under his breath, he wove a perimeter charm that would alert him if anyone magical—other than occupants of the house—entered the property.

Gideon’s eyes went wide. “You know you don’t have permission to cast those sorts of spells on
Muggle houses. That’s really illegal.”

“I’m an ‘it’s better to beg forgiveness than ask permission’ sort of bloke. And she was one of my best friends. Besides, I don’t think Crouch is paying any attention to what happens in the Muggle world. And these kids don’t show up in any records until they do their first bit of accidental magic.” He scowled at the Grangers’ house. “I’m not—I’m not going to let anything happen to them, records be damned. If someone comes to their houses who shouldn’t be there, I’m going to be there too.”

Gideon studied him for a long moment. “This isn’t our only stop today, is it?”

Harry squared his jaw and pulled out the long scrap of parchment he’d been working on. It had the address of every Muggleborn student from his world that he’d been able to find.

Gideon nodded slowly. “So who’s next?”

“Let me finish here, and then it’s Justin Finch-Fletchley. Rich bloke, Hufflepuff.” The face of a boy who had once been destined for Eton flashed in his mind.

“Well then, I’ll do the charming for that one.”

Harry gaped. “What? No, you don’t have to. You don’t even know—”

“It’ll be easier for us to manage half the alarm wards each, and I don’t care if it’s illegal either,” the redhead interrupted. “You want to try to save the world? Great. Sounds good.” Grasping Harry’s chin firmly, he stared into green eyes. “So count me in.”

Harry’s stomach fluttered and he knew the grin on his face had turned unforgivably goofy.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. Um, so you do Justin’s house, and then I can get the charms set up for the Creeveys, and you can do Nigel Yates’ place, and then we’re on to the Hopkins’ and Perks’—”

Wait. What’s wrong with him?

Harry cut off his prattling as soon as he noticed Gideon was still watching him, eyes dark and lips pursed.

“Gid? Is that okay? I mean—”

“No,” the other man said, sounding oddly strangled. “No, we can do all that later. Tomorrow.”

Before Harry could say anything Gideon had an arm around his shoulders—the dizzying whirlwind of Apparition surrounded him—and then they were in the comfortable bedroom above Prodigious Clocks.

What the—

His thoughts screeched to a stop as Gideon pulled him into a kiss that seemed more a beginning than a goal unto itself.

A hand slipped under his robes and made short work of the buttons on his trousers.

Oh.

Harry leaned back with a gasp. “Wow, yeah, okay. But what about”—oh hell, there go my trousers—“what about the whole ‘not putting our cocks in fun places for a while’ thing you were on about?”
Gideon was already shucking off his own clothes. “Don’t listen to me,” he bit out. “I can be really dim. Besides…” He broke off as he started on Harry’s shirt. “This whole saving the world thing…”

Bare skin slid against bare skin.

“It’s really attractive,” Gideon whispered into his ear as he maneuvered them onto the bed.

“Good thing—oh—” Harry arched as the man’s tongue found that spot on his neck. “—we have to save the world more tomorrow. And maybe—Merlin, Gid—some more next week…”

... 

Fabian hit the ceiling with a Silencing Charm as old Madame Frobisher and Mrs. Cadwalladar exchanged delightedly scandalised glances. “As I was saying,” he continued smoothly, “our patented Day-Planners are perfect for busy society ladies like yourselves. If you’d follow me…”

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to my awesome beta AverageFish for helping me with yet another big chapter. Check out their most recent HP fic, More than One Way to Skin a Cat (on ff: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13283547/)
XXXVI. Voces Familiarum

13 October, 1979

I may have to kill him.

“You can’t kill him,” Gideon murmured, sliding a hand along the nape of Harry’s neck.

He glared at the redhead mutinously, but the other man only smiled faintly and turned his attention back to the speaker addressing them from the centre of the Hogsmeade park.

“That’s right, you shit-for-brains peasants, I called you pointless wastes of magic!” Zoilus Dorbel sneered at the group of volunteers for the village’s militia.

The former Defence against the Dark Arts teacher stalked back and forth, shaking his head. It seemed escaping the DADA curse to a cushy job training Aurors hadn’t improved the bastard’s temper.

“Bloody wanker,” Rosmerta muttered under her breath, to a smattering of hearty chuckles. “Don’t know where he gets off calling us—”

Dorbel whipped around, his blasting hex sending her spiralling into the duck pond.

The shocked silence gave way to angry shouts and raised wands, but the man only laughed. “Belt it, you lot! She’ll have a few broken ribs, that’s all. I’m not here to be your mummy, and I won’t tolerate even the semblance of disrespect! I don’t care about your feelings any more than the Death Eaters do!”

Christ, he sounds like a barmier version of Moody back in fourth year.

And that was really a Death Eater from Azkaban.

Merlin.

Up at the front, the two Aurors who’d accompanied Dorbel shifted awkwardly. One of them, Frank Longbottom, put a hand to his temple.

Of course it was Harry whom Dorbel noticed then. “Oh, don’t like that, squib?”

Huh. Been awhile since I heard that one.

“What are you on about?” someone in the crowd shouted. “Harry’s no squib! Everyone knows that. He fought at the Ministry!”

Dorbel simply sneered again and ignored them.

“So who’s this next to our hero, then? This your boyfriend?”

Harry’s muscles tensed as Dorbel approached Loch on his left side. On his right, Gideon murmured
something he couldn’t hear over the blood suddenly rushing through his veins.

Dorbel stood so close to Loch that their noses nearly touched. “What a pretty dog, I see why you fancy him, squib. The village recruiting beasts to fight, hmm?”

*I’m definitely probably going to kill him.*

“I work here. I want to help protect it,” Loch said in a quiet voice that carried through the clearing.

“Well I sure as shit don’t train creatures,” Dorbel hissed, drawing a silver dagger with a practiced flourish. “Get gone or die.”

The villagers exchanged uneasy glances but none said anything.

The bitter taste of disappointment filled Harry’s mouth.

They’d…they’d just let it happen, wouldn’t they?

“C’mon Loch, let’s go. We’re better than this,” he said, not caring that everyone could hear. The sound of two people following him out of the park lightened his heart a bit. *At least Gideon and Fabian are with us.*

“That’s right, you maggots! Leave! I’m here to train you to fight a war, and fighting a war means pieces of shit like all of you should listen to your betters!”

“Ah, shut yer gob!”

One of the Pippin Boys, the adults sons of the man who ran the potions supply store, step forward, hands balled into fists. “I’m here to protect my town, not be called names!”

Harry’s wand was out and casting before Dorbel managed to finish his spell. The man’s hex slammed into the shield Harry had cast in front of Pippin and then rebounded back on Dorbel.

*But I just cast a shield. How the hell—?* He blinked dumbly as massive puss-filled boils erupted all over Dorbel’s face and hands.

“Plum shield there, Aberforth!” someone called out.

“And a bloody lovely Rebounder, Rosie!” another praised.

Harry turned to see Rosmerta, wand raised, standing with a wince.

Her eyes met Harry’s, and they shared a satisfied nod.

“It looks like our publicans got the drop on Mr. Fancy Auror Trainer!” Jinky Fenwick cried as the militia volunteers burst into applause. “C’mon, Harry, stay, we need you!”

“Yeah, and we can use the Prewetts for sure!” someone else added.

Harry stared at the crowd and then looked pointedly at Loch.

The only sound in the park was Dorbel’s gasps.

“I think,” Harry said slowly, “that I don’t belong here if my friend doesn’t.”

Feet shuffled and eyes wouldn’t meet his own.
He shook his head and started walking away. “But seriously,” he called back over his shoulder, “why should you all put up with that berk? Have Frank over there train you instead. He’ll treat you right, at least. And,” he added in a lower voice to his companions, “we’ll get Alice to show us a few things.”

Harry, Loch, and the Prewetts left the park to the sound of the Hogsmeade militia clamouring for Longbottom to take over their training.

The were halfway to the head when Loch finally murmured a quiet “Thanks Harry.”

“Theyir loss,” he shrugged, his temper still simmering. “You’re worth ten Dorbels anyway.”

31 October, 1979

“Oh dear…”

A rustling of parchment.

A gasp.

“Oh no, oh dear…”

Harry shared a look with Fawkes. He’d gotten rather used to Albus’ research mutterings over the last several weeks.

He turned to see the man hefting yet another heavy book onto his desk and frantically rifling through its pages.

“Merlin…can he have really…no, no, he couldn’t have, but…Merlin…”

Fawkes nipped his finger when Harry rolled his eyes.

“Care to share with the rest of the class, Albus?” he asked dryly.

The headmaster startled a few inches off his chair. “What—! Oh, oh it’s just you, Harry. My apologies, I’ve been quite engrossed in…well, may I offer you some tea? How long have you been here?”

“About two hours now, give or take.” Harry smiled. “And you did offer me tea when I got here. And you wished me a happy Halloween and also asked after the Dearborns. Don’t worry about it, I know how you get when you’re working.”

Albus sighed. “The habits of an old scholar.”

“So, have you found something then?”

“I hope not.” Albus leaned back in his chair, smile bleeding away. “It occurred to me that I might track Tom’s extracurricular pursuits as a student by reviewing the books he’d obtained from our library. I am…unsettled by what I have found.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at the dramatic pause.
“In his fifth year, Tom apparently became quite interested in the exploits of a number of Dark wizards. Ekrizdis, Raczidian, and particularly Herpo the Foul. Do you know of him?”

“Sounds like a charming bloke.”

Albus gave a strangled laugh. “Indeed. One of the earliest visionaries in the Dark Arts who also, perhaps not coincidentally, created the Basilisk. But few are aware of his far more dangerous invention, the horcrux.”

The headmaster paused again. Harry withheld a sigh.

*Yes I know, Albus. This is my cue.*

“What’s a horcrux?”

“Theoretically, it seems to be a means of achieving a type of immortality by splitting one’s soul, whereby a portion of that soul is stored in an object.” The shadows on Albus’s face seemed to darken. “In truth, it is an abomination, Harry. One of the few magics that I suspect is truly evil, as the soul is meant to be an inviolate, integrated whole.”

He split his soul?

Jesus.

“So do you think that Tom actually—”

“I don’t know,” the old man sighed. “Yet. But soon after checking out every book in the library on Herpo the Foul, I know he obtained permission from Professor Slughorn to read *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, the only text in the library that contained any actual information on horcruxes. That volume, as well as other Dark texts which also treated soul-based magic, were discovered missing not long after Tom paid the school a visit some years ago. If Tom has dared delve into practicing such soul magics…”

The headmaster slumped in his chair.

*He looks really tired.*

Fawkes chirped, and Albus returned a weary smile.

“So…I guess we’re researching horcruxes now?” Harry ducked out of the way as the book on Albus’ desk spat an acid green glob. It splattered onto a candlestick that promptly began to melt. “This should be fun.”

“Indeed.” Albus peered over his spectacles at him. “Though Harry, do you really wish to spend your Halloween evening here? I can’t help but think a young man your age could have a far more enjoyable night elsewhere.”

Harry shrugged. “Gid’s busy and it’s Doc’s night with the baby. If I go home, I know it’ll somehow become *me* on child-minding duty as well.”

“And you would choose delving into the mind of the Dark Lord over that?”

“Well,” Harry rubbed eyes still red from Rhys’ restless night the day before, “it *is* quieter here. Smells better too.”

Not to mention that here he could avoid Pel’s constant glares. The man had been furious Harry’d told
Lily and Gideon his secrets, though at this point he seemed to be savouring his rancour more than actually feeling it. That Harry felt bad enough to keep giving him free drinks probably just encouraged the bastard.

The book spat another glob his way.

Albus chuckled. “My boy, I welcome your company, but you really should raise your standards.”

The two men watched as the acid wad ate a hole in Dumbledore’s carpet.

“Point taken, Albus.”

The rest of the evening was silent but for the turning of pages and the headmaster’s occasional mumble.

xoxoxox

4 November, 1979

Licking his lips, Harry reread the letter that had arrived from Lily the day after Halloween. Gideon was watching with the penetrating expression Harry had long since dubbed his ‘I’m pondering deeply’ stare.

“You two still haven’t really talked, have you?” the other man finally asked.

“No,” he muttered, wondering idly if the cloak he was wearing was too casual. Or too boring. Or too something. “She’s been really busy working for Albus, and I’ve only seen her at Order meetings.”

It went unmentioned that Harry hadn’t contacted her again, except to accept the invitation.

He fidgeted with one of his sleeves. “Sure you don’t want to come?”

Gideon straightened the collar of Harry’s shirt, his hands lingering longer than necessary.

“I’m not invited, Harry. I think this one is for you.”

He nodded jerkily. “I know. I guess I’ll see you this afternoon sometime then?”

A kiss later and the younger man was on his way to Apparate to Godric’s Hollow, leaving Gideon to reread the note he’d discarded on a table.

Dear Harry,

If it works for your schedule, I would like to invite you to breakfast at my house this Sunday. Sirius’ birthday is Saturday, so I expect James will be busy recovering, giving us some time to talk.

Sincerely,

Lily

xoxoxox

Harry glanced around the large cottage, trying to tamp down the helplessness awkward feeling bubbling in his stomach.

It was a lovely place, he supposed. Old and large, but lived in. Comfortable. Rather more burnt orange and pea-green accents scattered about than was really wise, but the nods to 1970s Muggle
aesthetics seemed kind of...cute to him.

He and Lily were sitting at a breakfast table in the kitchen, their polite how are the Dearborns, how are your parents long since dried up.

His mother’s counterpart busied herself unnecessarily with the fine bone tea service that clashed spectacularly with the green-and-orange tablecloth. “So...have you ever been here before? In your world I mean?”

“Oh. Er—no. I mean, I actually don’t even know if my parents lived in the same house as you do.”

“I expect we—they may have. This house has belonged to the Potters for generations.”

“Oh.” Harry looked around thoughtfully as the silence thickened. Lily kept little vases of cut flowers on many of the surfaces. All of them were either brightly-coloured zinnias or asters.

There wasn’t a single lily in sight.

The clank of teacup meeting saucer made him jump.

“Oh sod it all!” Lily burst out. “This is ridiculous. Harry, I’m sorry, but I have absolutely no idea how to talk to my adult time-traveling baby from another dimension. I just don’t.”

He blinked.

The laugh burbled out of him unbidden.

A moment later and his entire body was shaking with an uncontrollable, delirious, wonderful feeling.

And then Lily was laughing too, her shoulders convulsing, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh my God,” she gasped through her giggles.

“I know, I know,” he managed before gulping down his pumpkin juice. “Of all the things I never thought I’d hear when I got my Hogwarts letter—”

“Me too, me too!” All he could see was a mop of red hair as she buried her face in her hands. “Oh Harry, magic is so weird sometimes!”

“Believe me, I really know that.”

Their laughter eventually subsided into sporadic giggles. Before the terrible awkwardness could rear its head again, Harry sobered.

“Look, Lily. You aren’t—well, you aren’t my mum. She died. You’re the person my mum could have been, maybe. Or maybe who she was once? But either way, you won’t ever be her.” He hushed Lily’s protest. “And that’s okay, don’t you think? We can’t change my past, you can’t be my mum, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be...I dunno...something, right? I mean—” He raked a hand through his hair. “I’d really like that.”

Green eyes clear and bright as cut glass regarded him for a long moment before she smiled. “Yeah Harry.” She grasped his hand, and he couldn’t help but notice how small it was in his. “Yes, we can be something to each other.”

xoxoxoxo
The next hour so was passed in light and idle conversation, as though Harry and Lily had come to an unspoken agreement that becoming ‘something’ to each other wasn’t a feat to be achieved over poached eggs and pastries.

He was just beginning to regale her with the tale of how the Marauder’s Map had once insulted Snape when he noticed her face fall.

“So…Sev—Severus was your professor?” she asked in a strange voice.

Harry grimaced. “Something like that. Didn’t teach me much. He hated my guts, I guess because he didn’t get along with Dad and Sirius. I still don’t get why he bothered saving my life in first year.”

Lily’s look prompted an explanation. “Quirrell—the professor with Voldemort in his head?—he cursed my broom in my first Quidditch match. Snape kept me from falling.”

“Oh…” Her eyes gazed into a distance that he couldn’t see.

“Lily? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, well, yes. I mean, maybe?” She laughed awkwardly. “But it’s not your fault. It’s just…I’m glad he saved you. And that he got through the war…”

“I still don’t quite get how that happened. He was a Death Eater. He had a Dark Mark and everything, but Dumbledore testified for him—”

A strange noise—something between a growl and a sob—interrupted him. Lily had gone quite pale.

“You’re sure? He really—oh God. He really became a Death Eater,” she said faintly, tears in her eyes.

He floundered at her stricken look. “Well, I mean, I’m pretty sure. I saw his arm after the Tournament but, really, he must have done something right to have Albus stick up for him. They wouldn’t let a Death Eater teach kids, after all!”

Quirrell? Moody?

Harry shook off his own objections. He didn’t care about facts when it came to making his mother cry.

“Oh, yes, of course,” she muttered in distraction. “I hope…well. It doesn’t matter. It’s just… I guess no one ever told you Severus was my best friend for years. He lived near me in Cokeworth.”

No. Fucking. Way.

“No fucking way!”

A sharp light glinted in her eyes. “Yes, he was, thank you very much!”

When Harry recoiled, she shook her head and softened her tone. “I’m sorry. I know that I don’t know your Severus. Mine just had, well he had a really hard life and I got rather used to defending him. Until we weren’t friends anymore, at least.”

His mind was shocked into complete blankness but for random, bewildered profanity. Somehow his lips kept moving.

“What happened?”
Lily picked at a flaky pastry until it resembled confetti. “He was in Slytherin. You saw how things could be at Hogwarts. He eventually had to choose, and he didn’t choose me. We fought. Later… later he tried to get me to forgive him, but I just couldn’t trust someone who hung ‘round the Death Eater crowd and called people ‘Mudbloods,’ you know? They—some of them really wanted me dead, I think.”

She bit her lip. “I was so angry at him, and hurt. But the disappointment was the worst. By the time I’d calmed down, Sev…he’d really gone over to the Death Eater crowd by that point. So I didn’t— Maybe if I’d tried again…” Lily stared at her hands. “Anyway, I haven’t seen him since we left school.”

Harry’s mind was still processing the idea that his mum was friends with Snape. He grasped blindly for something to say. “So, er—do you…do you miss him?”

She began torturing another pastry. “Some days, something funny will happen and I think, I can’t wait to tell Sev, and then I remember, and…and it’s like losing him all over again.” Her shoulders sagged. “So yeah, I miss him. But forgiving him is something else entirely, and honestly, Harry, I have no idea—”

“No idea about what, Lils?”

Both Harry and Lily jumped.

James Potter, hair a disaster and face rather peaky, slouched into the room.

“No idea how you and Sirius haven’t managed to get banned from every pub in wizarding Britain!” the redhead lied smoothly. “Especially when the Floo literally pours you out onto my living room rug in the middle of the night!” Her eyes narrowed. “And you know I hate being called ‘Lils’.”

His father’s counterpart’s expression turned contrite and Harry arched an eyebrow at Lily.

Guess I’m really not the only liar in the family.

“Well, that is a great mystery, my love. But for the record, at least I made it home.” James touched his temples gingerly. “I suppose Padfoot’s probably still asleep in Remus’ fireplace. He’ll have quite the time figuring out why he’s missing a shoe, his pants, and nothing else.”

Harry snickered as Lily groaned. “Eurgh, I really don’t want to know, James. So should I be expecting the birthday boy today, then?”

Her husband shrugged, downing what Harry immediately recognized as a Hangover Cure. “Dunno. We’re supposed to play some Quidditch, but I doubt he’s even awake yet.” Plopping himself down at the table and regaining his some of his colour, he smiled at Harry and began spooning breakfast onto a plate. “Good to see you Har—Wow, love, you need something from Harry here? Bringing out the Royal Doulton service and everything!”

Lily turned rather red and swatted her husband's arm.

The rest of breakfast was dominated by James’ enthusiastic retelling of the bits he remembered from Sirius’ night out, leaving Harry relieved that the trio of Marauders chose the Leaky rather than his own pub for their celebration. He noticed that after the particularly dodgy moments James would pause, as though subconsciously giving Lily time to make some little comment of dismay or derision.

She never missed her cue.
It was all so very domestic.

Harry couldn’t stop smiling. He even told the Potters the story of how Hagrid kissed the wrong old lady at Ab’s surprise party and had gotten his beard burnt off, not even noticing that the memory didn’t really sting so much anymore.

Eventually the food was gone and the table was cleared. James got to spelling the kitchen clean and looked at his watch with a frown.

“I guess Sirius isn’t going to make it. Probably still slobbering on Mooney’s floor.”

“Poor dear, no Quidditch. How ever will you make it through the day?” Lily commiserated. “But this means you have time to fix the charms on the roof, you lucky man!”

James made a pathetic whining noise, and both Lily and Harry laughed.

“Fine, yes, I understand I need to go to adultish things,” his father’s counterpart said. “I’ll see you later then, Ha—”

The man stopped mid-farewell and surveyed Harry critically.

“Hey—you ever played Quidditch, Harry?”

“Yeah.” He blinked “Actually, I’m not bad. Or at least I wasn’t. It’s been…a while.” And the last time I really flew was against a dragon.

James nodded slowly, then summoned a Quaffle from the hall. “Wanna have a catch?”

Harry’s breath hitched.

For years at Hogwarts he’d dreamed of playing Quidditch with his dad. Sometimes he would spend hours laying on his bed imagining what it would feel like to spend lazy Sunday afternoons tossing a Quaffle or chasing a Snitch with him. Nothing special, nothing important, just…nice.

He’d forgotten those desperate daydreams somewhere along the line.

For a moment, it didn’t matter that this James was not his father, that he was only a year older than Harry and that he was, well, a rather spoiled prat.

James Potter wants to play Quidditch with me.

... 

Harry met the man’s eyes. “I’d like that.”

James’ irrepressible grin snapped Harry back into real time. “Brilliant! Let’s go then. There’s a pitch on the outskirts of the village hidden from Muggles.”

He followed his dad’s counterpart to the door, half-convinced this was some strange dream.

Lily gave him a whisper of a smile as he passed.

I don’t what this all is or where it’s going. But it’s definitely something.

And it’s something worth having.
James handed him a broom—a Cleansweep Six.

“Do try and keep up, Aberforth.”

Harry’s lips curled into a smile.

*Oh James. You don’t stand a bloody chance.*

Late that night, Harry was charming away the Head’s typical weekend damage, a half-asleep Rhys strapped to his chest, when Sirius Black fell out of his fireplace and landed face-first on his hearth.

“Sirius?” Panic coursed through Harry as he rushed to the man, turning him over to search for wounds.

*Oh, eurgh!*

If all the worst smells of the Head procreated, the result would be the rank odour in which Sirius Black seemed to have been marinated.

The other man groaned and fumbled to his feet.

“We’re closed, Black,” Harry observed neutrally.

Sirius blinked in drunken confusion. “Yer holin’ a baby.”

“Oh, well-spotted.”

“Kin…kin yeh put it down fer a mo’?”

Sirius probably had a point. The man looked likely to collapse again. Clumsily unswaddling Rhys from his chest—*how does Guin make finagling this wrap-thingy look so easy?*—he placed the baby in its cot and walked back over.

Sirius stared at him through bleary, red-rimmed eyes.

“Okay there, Bla—?”

“Know ‘twas you killed Reg, Squib’lus,” he slurred.

Harry blinked. “Wha—?”

He was interrupted by Sirius’ fist slamming into his face.

Suddenly the floor was much closer than it ought to have been, and he was looking up at his old godfather’s counterpart through streaming eyes. The bottom half of his face was already dripping with blood and other nastiness.

“Whah duh--? You—you broke mah dose, you git!” he sputtered incredulously.

Sirius growled and lunged.

Not ten minutes later, Harry and Sirius were huddled against the bar with fear in their eyes and blood in, well, more places than either cared to admit.
“—with a baby in the room! And look at what you did to the tables! How, how did you two manage to break seven tables?”

“That speaks to natural talent, that does,” Doc noted mildly.

“And,” Guin continued after sending a scathing look at her husband, “the stemware was already in the kitchens! How in the world did you manage to shatter an entire tray of it in here?”

“Well, to be fair, it can all be fixed easily enough,” Sirius offered. “And we made sure not to hit the sprog, after all.”

Harry gingerly put his head in his hands. Apparently the sobering potion they’d given Sirius didn’t gift him with any sense.

“That’s not the bloody point! It’s three in morning, my baby is here, and you two were brawling like Muggle schoolboys!”

“Plus magic can’t give us back the bottle of Odgen's you boys broke.” Doc surveyed the massacre of bottles that now littered the floor behind the bar. “And hell, you got the Quintin Black! That’ll cost us.”

So not helping, Doc.

“Harry!” Guin’s voice, sharp as a whip crack, made him start. “I don’t expect much from this one, but what have you got to say for yourself?”

Don’t say it. It won’t help.

“Black started it!”

Doc hastily muffled his laugh.

Guin threw up her hands. “Fine. Fine! Doc! Get Rhys. We’re going to bed. You two—we’ve healed your worst hurts. Fix yourselves up, and don’t either of you dare leave until this place is back to normal. Do you understand?”

Harry considered pointing out that he was an adult now, thank you very much, and so Guin shouldn’t boss him around, but then he remembered he liked having all his bits just as they were.

“Yes ma’am,” the two young men murmured.

Doc snorted and scooped Rhys up as Guin’s scowl deepened.

Neither Harry nor Sirius moved, even when they heard the door to the Dearborns' room click shut. The steady plop plop plop of stout leaking from a cask with a broken seam—I think I did that with Sirius’ head—punctuated the silence.

Eventually Sirius sighed and drew his knees up to his chin, looking as young as Harry had ever seen him.

“At the Ministry Bellatrix said you were the ‘one at the house.’ This afternoon James said something about you once helping Lily’s family, though he didn’t know the details.” The man took a shuddering breath. “It was you who killed him. Reg.”

I won’t lie to Sirius. Not about something like this.
“Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

A heavy pause filled the room.

“And?” Sirius prompted.

Harry frowned.

“And aren’t you even going to say you’re sorry?”

A leaden weight settled in his stomach.

“No, I’m not,” he said gently. “I mean, I’m sorry that it happened. I’m sorry he made the choices he did and that he was doing what he was doing. But I didn’t know who he was, and it was the right move in that situation.”

Sirius picked at a tear in his jumper. “If you’d known, would you have done something else?”

Part of Harry wanted to slap the back of the man’s head. It wasn’t as though the two of them were great friends in this world. They’d only really spoken a few times!

Can’t see how he expects anything like that from me!

But another part of Harry remembered his godfather, his Sirius, and knew that if he had—

No. No, it wouldn’t have changed anything. If I’d spared his brother, it may well have gotten me and Petunia killed.

“No, I don’t think I would have. It—it happened really fast, and I was outnumbered.”

Sirius made a choking sound Harry couldn’t interpret and closed his eyes. “It…it really was them or you. And…and Reg made his choices.”

Harry nodded even though it hadn’t been a question.

“I really kind of hate you, Squibbulus.”

He could only nod again.

“I don’t like that you killed him,” Sirius admitted, his voice quiet and cracking.

Harry sighed. “I don’t like that I killed him either.”

The other man watched him for a few moments, his body unnaturally still. Finally he let his head thunk back against the wood of the bar. “It’s really fucking annoying that you’re a decent bloke, you know.”

“I know.”

Sirius gave him a sidelong glance and slowly, grudgingly, started to laugh. For a moment, just a moment, Harry saw his godfather sitting next to him.

When his laugh took on a hysterical edge, Harry gave Sirius a hand up. “C’mon, Black. Let’s get this mess cleaned up, and I’ll make you breakfast. Things are better with eggs and bacon.”

The other man grunted. “If that’s the extent of your wisdom, you’re a shit bartender.”
“Fair enough.”

With that, they got to work charming the pub clean in silence. Two hours later, just as the dawn was starting to turn the sky indigo, Harry served them up a hearty breakfast.

Nothing was said, no meaningful glances were exchanged—or punches thrown—but when Sirius left, the man clasped him briefly on the shoulder, looked him in the eye, and called him ‘Harry.’

xoxoxox

7 November, 1979

The fire wall exploded into life, stretching far out in front of them. Its towering flames seemed to attack the grey November sky.

“Whoa, not bad Harry!”

“That’s fucking brilliant,” Guin retorted hotly. “You’re stingy with your praise Longbottom!”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Okay, Harry, keep it going. So you all wanted to know some Auror spells? Well imagine that wall is a Conflagration Bomb.”

“That’s what they used at the Ministry, right?” Loch asked.

“Mm-hmm,” Gideon murmured.

Maintaining this spell really isn’t as easy as it looks. Harry gritted his teeth, trying to both follow Alice’s order and listen to her lesson.

“Most people would see fire and start in on the water spells,” Alice continued. “But a Conflagration spell is so hot that water turns to steam long before it reached the flames.”

For Merlin’s sake, get on with it!

“Harry,” Alice paused, “can you make your fire hotter to simulate that?”

Fuck no I can’t!

All he managed to respond was a broken “fuck” that in no way sounded like a whimper.

“Well, moving right along then,” Alice grinned, “the best way to deal with this sort of spell is to smother it. And if you’ve got a big fire like this one on your hands, you need a lot of material to smother it with. Earth works best. Watch.”

Through the sweat dripping into his eyes, Harry spied the Auror gesturing broadly with her wand before shouting an incantation.

With a great, shuddering groan a wave of earth at least a few stories tall heaved itself into life, rushing towards them in a thundering swell.

Harry’s massive fire wall disappeared under its surge, which dispelled into light ripples of rubble by the time it touched their toes.

“So,” Alice gasped, “that’s Terraeunda. Makes a huge wave of earth that you can use to put out fires. But it’ll leave you exhausted for a few.”
Harry, Gideon, Fabian, Guin, and Loch gaped at the blond.

“Good spell,” Gideon finally said.

“Good? *Good*?,” Fabian sputtered. “That was fantastic! You *sure* you’re married? And that I don’t have a chance?”

Alice laughed breathlessly. “Yes to both, you toerag, but thanks. It *is* a great spell. It started as a construction charm actually, used to excavate big areas. The key is to keep in your mind the exact form and size you want.” She sat down heavily on the ground. “You can even modify it for different elements. The captain of the Harpies uses the air version—*Aerisunda*—to send turbulent air at her players. Helps them get used to flying in bad weather.”

*Thank God Oliver Wood never heard of this.*

“Wait,” Guin said. “Harry said the Conflagration Bomb was *inside* the Ministry. So how did you—”

Alice smiled sheepishly. “It was in the bottom level, underground…Let’s just say that, if we ever get back inside, they’re going to find a pretty massive cave-in along a back wall.”

Harry couldn’t stop staring at the woman.

*Neville, your mum is a badass.*

“So, let’s have you all give it a go!” she chirped. “It’s just *Terraeunda*, sweeping wand movement from left to right to have it come towards you, the opposite to have it go the other way. Focus as much as you can on the size of the wave you want.”

Twenty minutes later they’d all managed the spell a few times.

Kind of.

Fabian at least seemed pleased that his thigh-deep wave was by far the largest.

“Oh, don’t look so glum!” Alice encouraged. “It just takes a bit of practice! We can try a few more times and then—”

“Auror Longbottom! What in Merlin’s name do you think you’re *doing*?”

Everyone jumped as a scowling Professor McGonagall stalked towards them, her tartan shawl flapping loudly in the wind. Frank Longbottom and another Auror trailed behind.

Harry was fairly certain that in that moment, everyone in the field sported the same guilty school-child expression.

“Profess—Minerva! Er, hi!” Alice stuttered with exaggerated brightness. “We’re just—”

“Destroying a field owned by Hogwarts? I can see that. And while necessity compels the Ministry and the school to share the castle, I am quite certain this is not an approved Auror training ground.” McGonagall’s eyes narrowed as she took them in. “Nor are your companions Auror trainees, to my knowledge.”

“Troubled times and all,” Fabian said smoothly. “We’re just trying to do our part by learning as much as we can.”

The professor pursed her lips. “Be that as it may, I advise you, Auror Longbottom, to clear such
activities with me in advance next time, lest we mistake your sessions as something more nefarious. Particularly given recent events.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Guin.

Frank spoke up. “Yesterday a group of Death Eaters tried to attack the Leaky Cauldron. It’ll be in tonight’s paper. Honestly, it wasn’t much of an effort—the Diagon Alley militia had most of them by the time Aurors arrived.”

Harry didn’t like that sound of that. “Are you sure they weren’t under the Imperius?”

“Yeah. From what I heard, they were just low-level thugs who were bored. Didn’t have much of a plan or anything.”

“Well,” Minerva interrupted crisply. “I believe we understand each other and can bid you good day.” She looked about the field, frowning at the massive cuts made into the earth and the huge piles of soil scattered about. “And of course, I trust you’ll leave our field precisely as you found it.”

The group watched her march towards the castle. Frank hung back, grinning smugly at his wife.

“So how do we fix this up?” Loch finally asked.

Everyone looked to Alice.

“Frank? Love? Any ideas?”

“No way. This is too amusing,” he laughed. “You’re on your own, Ally.”

Alice bit her lip, looking about helplessly. “Er—clean-up was taken care of by a different department…”

Harry sighed. “Let’s find Hagrid. I bet he’ll have some suggestions.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” she breathed in relief. “Okay, so we can meet again next week, but I have homework for you. There isn’t a prescribed defence for the Undae class spells, so I want you all to try and think of creative ways to fight a Terraeunda or Aerisunda that’s being used against you.”

Harry’s mind was already whirling through possibilities. This is why magic is so bloody fun.

xoxoxox

9 November, 1979

Harry, Loch, the Dearborns, and not a few patrons watched through the front window of the pub as a small band of Aurors Apparated the drunken Death Eater away.

“We could have waited to call them,” Harry muttered again. “He might have given up something on Volde—oh come on!—Him.”

“Harry, the man was already drunk when he got here and flashing his Dark Mark. He tried to lay into Loch and Marty—he even tried to punch Pel! Whatever secrets he may know—”

“An’ you can’t believe a little shitstain like that knows much,” Pel muttered.

Guin nodded and continued. “Whatever he may know, he’s way too drunk not to give it away during interrogation anyway. Now we look like good little citizens for calling the authorities on a
misbehaving drunk who, lo and behold!, just happens to turn out to be a Death Eater. It’s a win-win.”

Harry reluctantly conceded she’d made some good points.

As they all made to move away from the window, Doc’s hand fell on Harry’s shoulder. “Oi, Loch, you got the bar? We need to have a quick word with the boss here.”

At the young werewolf’s nod, a bemused Harry found himself being led to the stable with Guin following behind.

Doc rounded on him. “Harry, mate, we have to talk.” A glance at Guin and the man started floundering. “You know, I mean that is, you know we love it here, yeah? But…Black was able to Floo here in the middle of the night last week. And now a Death Eater just waltzed in. If it were just us, things would be different, but…”

“But we have Rhys to think about,” Guin continued. “This place just isn’t safe enough. We can’t use the warding charms we need to keep our home safe and stay open for business at all hours.”

“What—are you saying?”

Doc sighed. “We’ve been talking about it for a while now. We’re going to be moving out. We aren’t going to give up our shares or quit working here—”

“It really has become our home too, Harry,” Guin added quietly.

“But we can’t feel comfortable having Rhys here. And honestly, when he gets a bit older it’s going to be ruddy difficult having a little kid living here. I mean, how can we ever explain things like Yarda and her boys?”

Harry nodded slowly. It wasn’t as though she and her johns were discrete, and he certainly wouldn’t relish explaining prostitution to toddlers either.

“I—I mean, yeah, I get it. You have to look out for him. I don’t want you to go…but…yeah.”

I do understand. I just don’t want them to go. He absently stroked Goat when she rested her head on his lap.

Guin sat next to him on his old hay bed and put an arm around his shoulders. “We’ll still be part of the Head, Harry. Just sometimes a bit farther away is all.”

He nodded and cast about for something to say. “So, um, have you started looking for a place? Are you staying in the village?”

Doc shook his head. “We want to, but there’s nothing for sale or rent, and the damn Ministry or Hogwarts owns just about all the undeveloped land roundabouts. I dunno. Maybe Godric’s Hollow, though neither of us fancies having to Apparate or Floo every day.”

Harry didn’t care for the idea much either. Sure, being magical makes commuting pretty damn easy…but I just want them here. Close.

A fully-grown Luke the goat ambled over for some attention, trying to butt his mother out of the way.

Bloody little buggers, Harry thought fondly, avoiding the thought of the Dearborns’ imminent
departure. *But I haven’t been spending much time with them. Hell, I was unconscious all summer and they were probably stuck in here rather than playing out in the field.*

*Hold on.*

A slow smile spread on his face. “Actually…the Ministry and Hogwarts don’t own *all* the open land around the village. How do you feel about staying *really* close by?”

xoxoxox

**3 December, 1979**

Nearly a month later, Harry had just trundled back up from the stable when a patronus materialized in the middle of his pub.

“*Harry. Something has happened,*” the fox said in Lily Potter’s voice. “*We’re coming to speak with you. Please meet us at the Hog’s Head in five minutes if possible, and please keep this to yourself.*”

Across the public room, Fabian snickered. “Well, let it never be said that she lacks stealth!”

Pel and Marty Sorner laughed.

*Oh well done, Lily.*

Luckily, on that cold Monday evening, the pub was deserted but for the Prewetts, the two barflies, and the Dearborns, who had just returned from checking on the progress of their new home’s construction.

Harry sighed and wondered what had happened, and who the ‘we’ were that Lily had referred to.

He wasn’t really surprised when she stalked in two minutes later with her husband and Sirius in tow.

*Shite. This doesn’t look good.*

James’ eyes were furious dark slits, Sirius looked wild and panicked, and Lily’s entire being radiated rage.

“We need to talk, Harry. Now.”

“So we all heard,” Fabian drawled, refusing to shrink from her livid glare.

“*Privately,*” Sirius hissed.

Guin caught Harry with a significant look. *Oh for fuck’s sake, fine.*

“Well, okay, we can go upstairs to the sitting room.”

He pretended he didn’t hear Guin running for the kitchen—and her favorite little painting—as he led them up the stairs.

Likewise, he kept from rolling his eyes when James cast privacy charms throughout the room. *Yeah, good luck with that. But nice try.*

“So what’s going—”

“Lucius Malfoy just defected to our side.”
He couldn’t do much more than sputter in shock as Lily described the man’s casual surrender at the Hogwarts gates. From there he’d been shuffled into the Headmaster’s Office to a meeting (for which Lily served as Dumbledore’s assistant), where he’d been voluntarily dosed to the gills with Veritaserum by Minister Crouch and Alastor Moody.

“But—but why?” Harry finally managed.

Lily snorted. “Oh, they asked him that. He’s furious You-Know-Who left his father to be captured in the Invasion and hasn’t done anything to rescue him from Azkaban. Said he didn’t like how that boded for his or his wife’s family—”

Harry avoided Sirius’ eyes, knowing full well that the man and his late brother were Narcissa Malfoy’s cousins.

“—And that He’d done something hideous to himself, to his magic, some time back.”

“Like that wasn’t obvious after the Ministry,” James muttered darkly.

“And last,” Lily continued, “Malfoy didn’t like that You-Know-Who wasn’t really paying any attention to his old ‘grand plans,’ and has been ignoring all his toadies. I guess the little raids they’ve been doing since the Ministry Invasion—the Ravaging of Diagon, that attack on the Leaky—weren’t authorized by Him. It’s just bored Death Eaters. Malfoy said that, instead of being a leader, He keeps disappearing for weeks on end, and doesn’t tell anyone much of anything anymore.”

Harry sat back, his mind buzzing. Malfoy’s complaints sounded a fair bit like the concerns he and Guin had overheard him saying to the other Death Eaters in the Head the previous spring.

Yeah. Yeah, I could see him defecting if he thought Voldemort was screwing over his family and if the war wasn’t going the way he had expected it.

“Okay…well, I mean, I can’t stand the man, but this sounds like a good thing. But what in the world does it have to do with us?”

Lily’s eyes flashed as she took a deep breath. “Crouch told Malfoy that he didn’t care much to forgive any of his crimes just because he suddenly didn’t want to be on You-Know-Who’s side anymore. So Malfoy offered to be a spy—”

“Seriously? Lucius Malfoy a spy for our side?”

The mind boggled.

The redhead gave him an irritated frown. “Will you let me finish?” she snapped. “Yes, that’s what he proposed. And then Moody said something to the effect that we didn’t have much use for a spy who doesn’t know anything, since Malfoy had already been complaining that Voldemort didn’t share his plans with anyone. And then…and then Malfoy said he certainly didn’t come to us empty-handed. That he knows how we can get the Ministry. How we can take back the Ministry.”

Harry gave a low whistle. “Yeah, that would tempt them all right, wouldn’t it?”

“It would. So he laid everything out, all under the Veritaserum. Apparently, it’s being kept under guard at the Lestrange estate. It’s one their main bases; I guess dozens of Death Eaters stay there.”

“Bellatrix,” Sirius growled under his breath.
“But,” his mother’s counterpart continued, “Malfoy said that tomorrow at dawn most of them are planning to slaughter an encampment at Loch Morar. I guess with You-Know-Who not giving them anything to do, they’re bored and spoiling for a fight. It’ll be the perfect time for Aurors and Order members to breach the manor. Because his wife’s sister married a Lestrange, he can even get us through the family wards. The plan is to go in hard with everyone we have, take out any Death Eaters, and get away with the Seal. Then we can reopen the Ministry and start really fighting back rather than just scraping by at Hogwarts.”

“So…do you need me to fight then? I’m in, of course. I just don’t see what the problem is—”

The door to the sitting room banged open with such force that it fell off its hinges. At once the four of them had their wands out, though a moment later Harry lowered his.

“The problem, Harry,” Guin said through gritted teeth, “is the Loch Morar encampment. The Death Eaters’ target.” The others from the pub filed in behind her. Most seemed confused, though Pel looked especially solemn.

“You couldn’t have overheard us,” James shouted, his wand still out. “I cast privacy charms!”

Pel rolled his eyes. “Oh bless your heart, you sweet summer child.”

Doc plopped down in a free armchair as a fedora-wearing Ariana appeared and waved at the gathering. “Use your heads, mates. You’ve heard by now that Harry reports suspicious things from the Head to Dumbledore. Hard to spy in a place like this if a simple sixth-year privacy spell can actually do anything.”

James’ sputtering would have been funny if Harry wasn’t busy trying to figure out what he was missing in all this. He shook his head in confusion as Gideon sat down next to him. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what the problem is, Guin.”

Guin and Lily both huffed out furious breaths.

“Loch!” the brunette hissed.

At the same time, Lily snapped “Remus is there!”

“The Morar encampment,” Pel explained in the same voice he’d used when teaching Harry History of Magic, “is a small island in the lake inhabited by werewolves. On the night of full moons, the residents and several others from Britain go there to transform so as not to harm innocents.”

“Malfoy said that the Morar werewolves were resisting Voldemort,” Lily added. “Remus says they won’t join the Order either. They want to be neutral.”

“Tonight’s the full moon,” Gideon observed slowly as the realization hit him. “Moon’s already up. Oh, hell, they’ve already transformed, so we can’t warn them.”

“And you said that the Death Eaters will attack at dawn tomorrow, didn’t you Lily?” Fabian asked. She bit her lip furiously. “They’ll be sitting ducks once they change back.”

Although some in the room looked confused by the Muggle expression, its meaning was clear enough.

“The Ministry isn’t going to do anything about the people on Morar, are they?” The harshness of Guin’s voice sounded like it was ripping her throat raw. “The werewolves will transform at dawn,
and they’ll be attacked when they’re weak and helpless with the pain of it. And the Ministry isn’t going to do anything, is it?”

Lily paused. “Barty Crouch said that with the Ministry and Order forces being severely depleted since the Invasion, we couldn’t spare anyone. Dumbledore didn’t—he didn’t disagree. And then Crouch, he—he—” She glanced at James, whose hands were balled in fists so tight his knuckles were white. “He said that we couldn’t ask for a better diversion, since we’d be able to take back the key to the Ministry without endangering a single innocent life.”

Doc and Guin were on their feet, cursing loudly, and others were talking, talking, talking.

All Harry could focus on was the fact that the Ministry was going to let the werewolves die, while they capitalized on the opportunity their deaths provided.

_Loch._

_Lupin._

_No._

_Goddamn all of this._

He stood up slowly and the din died.

“Please excuse me,” he said with forced calm as his fury built. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Rage blurred his surroundings. One moment he was out the door of the pub and striding into the back garden, the next he had Apparated to the ward edge of the school. And then he was stalking up the stairs to Albus’ office, heedless to the indignant blustering of the gargoyle that guarded the entrance.

Blocking the curse that a startled Moody sent towards him was second nature.

“What the devil are you—” Barty Crouch squawked.

The third man in the room regarded him gravely from behind half-moon spectacles.

“You’re just going to let them die?” Harry said in a deadly quiet voice. “Even the man who’s there because you asked him to be?”

“Harry, please sit dow—” Albus began in a quiet voice.

_I can’t believe I was starting to trust him! Starting to believe in him again!_  

_Bastard, Ab’s voice growled in his mind. Always said he was, lad._

Looking at Dumbledore hurt. “Oh God, you really are a bastard.” His voice cracked, not in fury but under the burden of terrible, crushing disappointment.

“Dammit, Albus, I don’t know what kind of place you’re running here! Your blasted security is a farce,” Crouch snapped. “I told you that we should make your little chippie of an assistant take a secrecy vow! She must have skipped this one straightaway, with nothing to stop her from telling him—or anyone else—everything! We _must_ keep this quiet until we muster our forces!”

Dumbledore hummed something mildly, but it was Moody who caught Harry’s attention. The man had fixed both his magical and his natural eye on the Headmaster, his expression intent.
What is he—?

Wait.

Dumbledore gave the tiniest of shrugs to Moody’s scrutiny, and the gnarled Auror’s mouth twitched momentarily in something like…

Something like amusement.

Hold on.

Harry stared at the Headmaster, who was once again responding to some sputtered comment of Crouch’s or other.

He knows Lily Potter. Not only was she a student and then an Order member, but she’s been working next to him since the Ministry fell.

He had to have known that she would be upset over one of her husband’s best friends being targeted by Death Eaters and abandoned by the Ministry.

. . .

He let her go without a vow on purpose.

Albus glanced at him. His expression threatened to turn apologetic, but he kept his mild mask in place even as he slowly winked at Harry.

Christ.

Of course it was on purpose. He knew Lily would tell James and Sirius, and he had to know those two wouldn’t just let it lie. They’d do whatever they could to save Lupin.

The old man’s eyes flicked over to him again, and this time Harry was sure he saw an apology there. An apology mixed with something that smacked almost of…resolution.

. . .

For whatever reason, he thinks he can’t do anything to help the werewolves. So he made sure to set things up so that others could.

He wanted to rage again against the man, because dammit all, he was sick of games and politics and people doing things other than the things that damn well should be done.

But.

But he couldn’t avoid the memory of how Albus had helped him during his trial, and the look of real relief that had graced the man’s face the first time he’d seen Harry awake after the Invasion.

He just can’t do everything, no matter how powerful he is.

And tonight…at least he’s trying to do something.

. . .

So this one’s on us, then.
“This—” he found himself saying, rudely cutting off whatever Crouch was going on about. Moody snorted. “This is a waste of my time.”

Without another word he turned on his heel and marched down the spiral staircase.

_Maybe that wasn’t the most tactful way to go about it, but honestly I just don’t give a fart._

xoxoxox

Gideon, Hagrid at his side, was just entering the Hogwarts’ gates when Harry drew near.

“Everyone in there still alive then?” the redhead asked placidly.

Harry flushed a bit “Yeah. Er, sorry about just leaving like that. I was a little…”


Hagrid put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, driving him a bit deeper into the snow. “All righ’ there ‘Arry? Gideon here was tellin’ me that you an’ the others were all fired up about somethin’.”

He tried to smile, but it felt like a grimace. “It’s just that some of our friends are in trouble. So we’re —” he shot a quick look at Gideon, whose nod confirmed that he was part of the ‘we’—“well, we’re going to have to do something about it.”

The half-giant regarded him shrewdly. “Yer spoilin’ ter fight, aren’t ya?” He nodded without waiting for a reply. “‘A course ye are. Well, count me in ter help.”

“What?” Harry exclaimed. Hagrid had to be the gentlest person he knew, and hardly fit for an actual battle. “No, Hagrid, it’s fine, really—”

“I’m yer godfather, an’ I say ye don’t get ter go fight ‘less I’m there too, ain’t no two ways about that! ‘Specially not after that stunt ye pulled at the Ministry.”

Several rational, logical objections sprang to mind, but in his surprise Harry simply mouthed nonsensical words.

“Well, it’s settled then.” Hagrid clapped both men on the back.

xoxoxox

He was still trying to figure out a way to send Hagrid off without hurting his feelings when the trio approached the pub. Harry frowned at the “Closed” sign posted on the door.

_What the hell? We never close this early._

Inside he found a flurry of activity, as the Dearborns, Potters, Sirius, Fabian, Pel, and even Marty Sorner bustled about, talking in small groups.

Then Harry noticed something that stopped him dead.

“What? What are you doing here?”

Looking strangely at ease in the dodgiest pub in Hogsmeade, Minerva McGonagall arched an eyebrow.

“One could hardly expect me to sit by while one of my Gryffindors was in trouble,” she responded
tartly. “Misters Black and Potter need not have been so ardent in their appeal for my help. Besides,” a frown he remembered very well etched itself into her face, “Barty Crouch was uninterested in having ‘a lady of my advanced age’ take part in the raid on Lestrange Manor. Thus I’ve been forced to lower my standards and join the second string so as to find a proper battle for the evening.”

All her former Gryffindors—save Harry—stifled laughs.

“Oh do prepare us some tea and stop gaping, Mr. Aberforth. It’s terribly unattractive.” She straightened her shawl and surveyed the room. “We only have eight hours until dawn. I’d say it’s time for a battle plan.”

Chapter End Notes

**Shameless Theft:** The line “wanna have a catch?” and the response “I’d like that” were both shamelessly stolen from one of the most imaginative movies of all time, *Field of Dreams* (1989).

Thanks, as always, to the wonderful **AverageFish** for beta-reading this chapter! Have you ever wondered what would happen if post-DH Snape was hurtled back in time into the body of an infant Harry Potter? AverageFish has.

Check out their story *More Than One Way to Skin a Cat* (ffn story ID: 13283547).
XXXVII. Fools, Bastards, and Better Things

3 December, 1979

The voices in the pub kept getting louder and louder.

Harry closed his eyes.

Two of their eight hours had passed, and they hadn’t come any closer to forming a workable battle plan.

_This would be a lot easier if we knew what we were planning for._

The problem, as McGonagall had summarized an hour earlier, was simple. Of course, they all knew that the encampment was at Loch Morar. However, as the Transfiguration professor had pointed out, the lake was ‘quite a large place,’ and none of them knew precisely where the werewolves actually were.

And they really were short on fighters.

A very frustrated Lily had left not long after his arrival. While she wanted to fight for Lupin, her position as Dumbledore’s assistant required she help coordinate the attack on Lestrange Manor.

‘‘Help coordinate’ really just means I’ll be stuck getting Barty Crouch’s tea and biscuits,’’ she’d snarled through gritted teeth.

Pel had bowed out, reminding Harry that he wasn’t half-shit at the law, but shoddy at casting spells beyond those needed to light his cigarettes. “But if you all come back half-dead, I’m a dab hand at calling for help,” he’d assured them.

Doc and Guin were another story.

Not long after the planning session had started, the petite brunette had announced that she would be taking part in the defense while her husband remained at home with Rhys.

Judging by the explosion that followed, this was the first Doc was learning of her decision.

As the pair argued passionately behind a silencing spell, Harry had seen that the man was fighting a losing battle.

“What do you think she’s saying?” Gideon had murmured in his ear.

“Probably that she’s better at fighting than him, especially since he’s down an arm. Plus, she always was more keen to fight in than he was.”

At that point both Doc and Guin turned towards him with flashing eyes, and he’d realised that their spell was probably only keeping others from hearing them, but not them from hearing others.

He’d promptly moved to the other side of the pub, Gideon chuckling softly behind him.
In the end, Guin had curbed her husband’s protests somehow, and she was added to the roster of fighters.

The final addition was a surprise.

“Yeah, ‘course I’m going,” Marty Sorner had said indignantly. “I ain’t bad with a wand and Loch’s a decent bloke. Plus, if you and Guin die, I doubt Doc’ll have the heart to keep the place open, and then where the hell would I go?”

As far as reasons for defending a despised minority group against terrorists went, Marty’s motivations probably weren’t the noblest, but they were good enough.

**So, it’s me, Guin, the Prewetts, James, Sirius, McGonagall, Hagrid, and Marty.**

*Nine people planning to fight God-knows how many Death Eaters “somewhere” around a massive lake in a place filled with werewolves.*

Christ, planning was hard.

“Oi, Harry, you want to help out here?” Fabian called, rousing him out of his thoughts. “We’ve only got six hours to figure out something!”

“Honestly, I usually just show up and cross my fingers.”

McGonagall sniffed while Wigol Palter—we’re closed, how the hell did he even get in here?—giggled and motioned for a drink.

“Jes’ way, Hry,” the old man mumbled, as incoherent as ever. “Gvitamo.”

**Gee, thanks for that, Wig.**

“Darlings, exciting as this little hubbub is, are we ever going to get our bloodwine, or do we need to lower ourselves to Knockturn?” a cultured voice cut in.

Sanguini and Panty were draped elegantly over chairs in the darkest part of the pub.

“Dammit, you two, we’re closed! How the hell are all you people getting in here?” Harry snapped, handing Wig his beer.

Sanguini merely arched a brow. “Such manners, darling…What has all your wands in such knots?”

Doc ran them through the problem even though McGonagall, Sirius, and James kept trying to shush him. “What?” he demanded. “They’re *regulars,*” as though that explained everything.

“So, they’re attacking Morar,” the vampire mused. “The defence of the island should be straightforward. I hardly understand the melodrama.”

Everyone stopped.

“Are you implying that you’ve been to the encampment, young man?” McGonagall asked sharply.

“Not I, little girl,” the vampire laughed. “But due a regrettable bout of irrationality some years back, my friend here became quite familiar with the place.”

Panty glared. “Oh, listen to you! You’re still smarting because Cecily chose me. Irrationality? **Anyone** would have welcomed a chance with her, werewolf or not!” Panty turned to Harry with
exaggerated dignity. “I am quite open-minded, you know.”

Giggles from Guin drew everyone’s attention. “So, you had a thing for a werewolf girl? A girl who lived at Morar? Isn’t a vampire with a werewolf a big no-no?”

“It was the ’20s, my dear. A very liberating decade.” Panty hummed.

“As fascinating as inter-species sex is,” Sirius broke in, “and don’t get me wrong, I am fascinated, but can you tell us everything you know about the encampment?” The young man’s eyes glinted. “And then, if there’s time before the fight, you can tell us about the sex.”

McGonagall slapped him on the nose with a rolled-up _Prophet_.

“Well, I don’t know…” Panty began with a sly look at Harry.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake! Tell us and you both drink free for the next week,” Harry said.

“Deal.” Grinning, the vampire started sketching a flaming map in the air with an elegant finger. “The encampment is on the middle island in the centre of a group located in the western half of the lake. As you can see, its shape is distinct.”

It was. The island looked rather like a smushed hourglass, its two unequal halves tapering in the middle to a small spit of land that connected them.

“The smaller southern half is where werewolves stay when not transformed, while the larger northern part is stocked with animals for them to hunt on full moons. What you pretties are interested in, however, is the narrow bit in the middle. It’s only about thirty or forty meters wide, and the werewolves have built a wall to keep themselves contained in the northern half during their change.”

Guin narrowed her eyes at the schematic. “Anything else?”

“The whole island is covered with anti-Apparition and anti-Portkey charms,” Panty continued. “The werewolves’ doing, designed to keep them in. The Ministry doesn’t allow any offensive protections, of course. On a full moon, the only way onto the island is to come in by boat and dock in the south. At least it was in fifty years ago.”

Everyone eyed the map closely.

“What you’re implying, Mister…Ms…” McGonagall floundered.

“I find binaries so tedious,” the vampire sighed.

The professor pursed her lips. “What you’re implying, Panty—” she glared as several of her former students smothered giggles—“ is that the werewolves will be in the north, and the Death Eaters will be forced to approach from the south, allowing us to create a—”

“Chokepoint,” James muttered.

“Precisely,” McGonagall smiled. “Our mission is clear. We shall station ourselves at the wall, with some to the sides to guard our flanks. Their numbers may be far superior, but we’ll nullify that advantage by forcing them to fight us in the narrowest spot we can.” She surveyed the room, a twinkle in her eyes. “I rather suspect we can prepare quite a few surprises in the southern half to winnow down their numbers before we have to meet them on the field.”

Harry noticed he wasn’t the only shocked one—poor Sirius in particular looked like he might never
blink again.

*I guess you’d have to be something of a natural general to wrangle a house full of hormonal Gryffindors.*

“Well, darling?” Sanguini asked languidly. “Our spirits?”

Harry grinned and Levitated the entire bottle of bloodwine over.

“Excellent! You know,” Panty’s lips smacked happily at the taste, “I’d have gone as low as free drinks for tonight.”

Harry snorted. “And I would’ve gone as high as free drinks for the next decade.”

*For Loch and Lupin...hell, I'd have gone as high as free drinks for the rest of my life.*

xoxoxox

4 December, 1979
90 minutes before dawn

The two boats slipped silently through ink-black water, the full moon the only light in the empty world of Loch Morar.

Harry didn’t want to breathe.

Not even a ripple betrayed their approach, thanks to a spell the pirate Red Nora had taught him.

Fabian guided their boat along the coastline of the werewolves’ island, staying a good dozen meters away from the warding charms that pulsed around the place. In front of them, the Transfigured boat holding McGonagall, Hagrid, James, and Sirius led the way.

To his left, the shores of the northern part of the island bristled with pines and oaks, their forms etched sharply in midnight black against the charcoal sky.

Suddenly, a howl cut through the silence.

Guin’s breath caught.

Another howl. And another. And another.

“They’re coming closer,” she whispered. “They know we’re here.”

Gideon nodded.

Then there they were, eyes shining out of the underbrush, the rattle and thrum of their growls setting Harry’s teeth on edge.

One massive werewolf lunged from the treeline into the lake.

“Oh dear Merlin, they can swim,” Fabian gasped.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Guin’s voice was a high-pitched whisper. “Panty said. The charms won’t let him get far.”

They watched in morbid fascination as the werewolf started to thrash futilely in the water, just a few
meters out from the shore.

Their boats continued their course to the south, accompanied only by furious snarls and impotent howls.

xoxoxox

They arrived in a little harbour just by the narrowest part of the island and disembarked.

To their left, a five-meter tall wall stretched from one end of the narrow bit to the other. The air around the wall was thick with charms that continued beyond its length and into the water, completely blocking off the north end of the island. A single door, etched with runes, was set in its center.

“Panty said the door won’t let anyone through during the full moon, werewolf or wizard,” Guin reminded them. “But once dawn breaks, it’ll open for anyone.”

To their right was a clearing framed by thick growths of trees broken only by a few footpaths and an occasional rusty caravan. A grilling pit in the centre was ringed with plastic lawn chairs. In the distance to the south, a cabin surrounded by greenhouses stood dark and silent.

“The Death Eaters’ numbers will be much greater than ours, meaning they will likely bring their boats into the larger harbour south of here,” McGonagall mused. “This clearing will be our battleground.”

James grinned nervously. “Well, let’s start setting up. Wouldn’t want to deny them a proper welcome.”

xoxoxox

Dawn was twenty minutes away when they came.

Guin looked at Harry sharply at the rising din of voices and the sound of boats cleaving through the water. They had paired up as the rear-guard of the western flank, stationed a bit south of the grilling pit.

Harry moved silently inland, waving once and peering through his omnioculars. Marty, on the eastern flank with Hagrid, spotted him and signalled back. Gideon and Fabian, positioned midway up the wall on the platform that McGonagall had created, were already signalling to the Transfiguration professor, perched imperiously on the platform above the door, and to James and Sirius, positioned on the eastern side of the wall.

A moment later and the five on the wall had Disillusioned themselves.

Harry scowled. *I want to be on the wall!* a voice in his mind whinged. *I can’t see anything down here!*

Guin, on the other hand, had been delighted with her assignment.

“Don’t you see, Harry? The Death Eaters will go right past us to the wall, and we get to sneak up from behind!”

“Stab them in the back to your heart’s content, you ruddy Slytherin,” he’d smiled.

The din grew louder.
It sounds like there’s...yeah, there’s a lot of them.

Through the underbrush he spied the shadows of boat after boat passing, the swell of voices making no attempt at stealth.

Guin’s breathing sped up.

His skin crawled and his wand hand ached to start casting as the voices grew louder, closer.

Don’t move. Don’t breathe. You have to let them pass.

He glanced back at the wall, trying in vain to spy Gideon’s Disillusioned form.

He fights best with Fabian. He’ll be okay. Guin’s your main responsibility tonight.

Doc had made that clear before they’d departed. His lone arm had pulled Harry roughly aside. “You bring her back to me, kid,” he’d ordered, his voice raw. “Please. I don’t want anything without her, you understand?”

Harry’s nod had been his word.

“Don’t worry, Harry.” Guin whispered in his ear. “I’ll protect you.”

He tried to smile as the Death Eaters started trooping into the center of the island. It was impossible to get a true feel for their numbers from his position in the undergrowth, but they had to be at least five or six dozen strong.

They tromped over fallow vegetable patches and paths with reckless abandon. No detection spells were cast, no shields were raised. Although some seemed to be attempting to create a semblance of order, they were a tiny minority.

It’s like a party to them. They expect this to be easy.

As the Death Eaters approached the grilling pit, Harry tensed.

Here we go...if this doesn’t work...

He rolled his wands in his hand, an Incendio on his lips.

“Trust me,” Sirius had promised with a sly smile, “At least one of them won’t be able to resist some proper wanton destruction, and this little guy in the middle of the clearing may as well have a sign on it begging to be destroyed.”

The Death Eaters in front neared the grill.

Come on, you bastards...

He saw the lazily-cast Blasting Hex arc towards the grill--and shoved himself and Guin as far to the ground as he could. Her shields and sound-dampening spell snapped over them both.

His teeth rattled from the massive fireball that exploded in the center of the pit. A moment later, the clearing echoed with the chain-reaction of smaller explosions that ignited farther toward the south.

Harry smiled grimly. Damn, Sirius, that was brilliant.

He wasn’t sure he’d ever forget the vicious look that settled on the young man’s face when Harry
had explained exactly what petrol did when exposed to a flame.

The roar of the explosions was replaced by screams.

The Death Eaters who hadn’t been badly-wounded or killed by the explosions were scrambling about in disarray, many aflame, some attempting to issue orders—most frantically searching for their unseen opponents. A few Death Eaters tried casting *Hominem Revelio*, but the fire, smoke, and mass of people made the attempts pointless.

Harry had been expecting the screams. He hadn’t been expecting the smell.

*Deal with it. You knew this wasn’t going to be pretty.*

The rattle-turned-roar of stone hitting stone signalled the start of their defence’s second phase.

Between the crackling of fires and the screams of the wounded, the Death Eaters didn’t seem to hear the muted sounds of hundreds of stones—collected into three strategically-placed piles behind them—shooting up more than hundred meters in the air.

Though he couldn’t see them, he knew the Disillusioned defenders on the wall were frantically transfiguring the three airborne columns of stones. His Silencing spell shattered under the sudden, deafening shriek of metal upon metal above him.

“*Shields, now!*” Guin hissed.

*Definitely.*

And then hundreds of jagged bits of iron screamed into the clearing in a murderous hailstorm.

Many of the Death Eaters managed to raise their own shields, but the ground was still suddenly littered with enemies seeping blood from dozens of ragged wounds.

A particularly large shard of iron had taken off someone’s arm.

“They’re by the wall!” a voice cried over the din. The Death Eaters that could all turned to charge.

*Well, he’s half-right.* Biting back his concern for the five on the wall, Harry narrowed his eyes.

*My turn.*

As the Death Eaters crossed the clearing just past the grill, he and Marty—who had proven himself a dab hand with spells—started casting Tweeny Twig’s stone-softening charm like mad on the ground.

The Death Eaters at the front of the charge suddenly found themselves floundering helplessly in a deadly pit of liquid rock that stretched from one side of the clearing to the other.

Quickly switching tacks, Harry, Guin, and Marty started felling as many trees on either side of the pit as they could. Some crashed into the trapped Death Eaters, others sent those behind the pit scrambling for cover.

It didn’t really matter that most of the trees weren’t thick enough to do real damage to those they struck.

Harry couldn’t help but shiver as a still-invisible McGonagall, James, and Sirius began cursing the fallen trees.
The clearing came to life with writhing branches that whipped and snagged around the Death Eaters’ arms and legs. Some pierced right through their bodies and held them fast.

Harry swayed.

*God, it’s just like the graveyard.*

Rationally, he could appreciate James’ idea to use the Predatory Wood curse to trap and render their enemies helpless, but he still wanted to shrink away from carnage that was a little too familiar.

*Get yourself together, dammit!*

He shook his head violently.

*Time to hem them in.*

Taking a deep breath, Harry cast his best Fire Wall across the farther edge of the clearing.

“Hell yes! They aren’t retreating while that’s up!” Guin sang in his ear.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Death Eaters falling to the ground with thick metal mittens imprisoning their hands.

A grim smile curled on his lips. Gideon and Fabian had both really taken to the old Black family curse Sirius had taught them all.

None of the group were so great at the counter-curse.

None of them really cared.

*I’m sure someone’ll figure out how to get the mitts off them. Eventually.*

Gritting his teeth at the strain of keeping the Fire Wall up, he allowed himself a glance over his shoulder.

Guin was whirling and dipping, her wand shooting slender daggers at the ankles of the enemy. Their tendons severed, they soon found themselves victims of the Predatory Wood or the Prewett’s’ curses.

A moment later his blood chilled as he realised he could see Guin.

*Shit—her Disillusionment dropped—*

His instincts screamed at him just in time to scamper out of the way of a volley of curses.

The Fire Wall fell.

*Guess they can see me too now,* he thought with strange calm as he turned to face the oncoming mass of Death Eaters.

*Here we go, then.*

*Christ, there’s still way more of them than us.*

He started firing Bone-Breaking hexes, non-lethal Cutting curses, and weak Blood-Boilers, having to curb his instincts with every spell cast.

*We are making this so much harder than it needs to be!*
His mind kept seeing openings for Fire Whips and Cutting Curses, explosive hexes and some of Tweeney’s spells modified for battle.

But McGonagall had been firm to try to capture rather than kill once they’d gotten to this point in the fight.

“We need as much information as possible, Harry,” James had agreed, his face grave. “Every enemy we capture alive is a potential source that can bring Him down.”

As he smashed a trio into a tree with his best Concussion Hex, Harry wanted to grouse about the bleeding hearts of the Order.

The occasional glance at the rest of the battlefield, however, made their ruthlessness all too clear.

The five on the wall were still Disillusioned—so it was impossible to tell who was doing what—but he was pretty sure that McGonagall was responsible for the trio of massive lions ranging through the clearing. And only Sirius would think to transfigure men’s fingers into mice which made off with their wands even as their owners gaped at the sudden stumps of their hands.

Someone else was carving the clearing with blasting hexes, sending people crashing into each other.

He was pretty sure that Gideon was responsible for the swarms of fireflies that exploded in little bursts around their targets’ faces, leaving the Death Eaters blinded, burned, and easily taken down.

And Hagrid. Sweet, gentle Hagrid…

Apparently the half-giant had given up on his pink umbrella and had simply grabbed a Death Eater by the ankle, brandishing him like a club that sent men flying while a shocked Marty attempted to keep them shielded.

Harry just kept cursing every black-robed form he saw.

*There are so many.*

He had no idea how many Death Eaters had come to the island, but there *had* to be far more than fifty.

*But way more have fallen than are still standing.*

Just as hope bloomed in him that the battle was winding down, the tide turned with a single shout.

“No, Fabian!”

He’d never even heard Gideon raise his voice. Not once. And never...never like *that.*

*Gideon should never sound like that.*

Turning slowly, Harry watched as a fully-visible Fabian crumpled and fell from the wall into the crowd of Death Eaters below.

*Their Disillusionment spells finally broke. Fuck.*

And then Gideon jumped down into the fray after him, lost to Harry’s view in the smoke and spellfire and dwindling push of black-robed figures.

McGonagall faltered, jumping sideways on the platform to avoid what Harry realised with mounting
horror was a great, furred arm attempting to claw its way over from the other side of the wall.

“Oh God, they werewolves are trying to climb,” Guin whimpered, but the legs that pushed her forward to the wall were steady and strong.

A hint of the coming dawn peeked through the horizon.

Another howl of agony splintered through the twilight.

Harry took off after Guin.

Some of the Death Eaters still on their feet ran past him, intent on the harbour, the ships, escape.

But not enough were fleeing.

You won’t get any of them, you bastards!

He may have just thought it. He may have yelled it. It didn’t matter.

They’re mine, godda—

Flying back onto his arse, he scrambled in the smouldering leaves to confront the solid, invisible something that he’d hit.

Harry blinked. The man’s Disillusionment spell wasn’t perfect, leaving an outline of his features as though drawn in clear air. A hooked nose, lanky frame, straggling hair.

An almost-invisible Severus Snape was half-prone on the ground, his colorless eyes staring up at Harry even as one hand clutched his own ribs in pain and the other pointed a steady wand at Harry’s chest.

He’s a Death Eater!

But…but I knew he became one, didn’t I? It was his Dark Mark that he showed Fudge after the Tournament.

The young Snape’s eyes flicked to the wand Harry had aimed at his head.

Harry wasn’t sure if he could outcast Snape.

He wasn’t sure if he should try to outcast him.

Maybe…is he a spy for Albus? My world’s Dumbledore must have had a reason to trust him enough to teach kids…

The crackle of spellfire in the clearing felt like the sound of Harry’s time running out.

Snape licked his lips.

I don’t know! I just don’t have time for Severus-fucking-Snape!

Somewhere, someone screamed.

And Lily said he was her best friend for years.

Goddammit it all.
“Go then.” Harry’s spat, the taste of the hissed words bitter on his tongue. “Just fucking go.”

Snape’s translucent form tensed.

The moment dragged on.

And then Snape got to his feet and bolted towards the harbour.

Please let that have been the right thing to do.

Turning back towards the battle, he started to run again.

xoxoxox

“You are surprisingly adept,” McGonagall bit out as he tried to heal the badly-charred skin of her shoulder. Sitting against the wall, her hair long since fallen from her customary bun, she looked strangely vulnerable.

“Thanks,” he muttered, his eyes on his work. The weak rays of the winter dawn at least helped him see what he was doing. As he started on a particularly blackened, blistered area, the professor hissed and shifted away. “I told you not to move!”

McGonagall sniffed. “Bedside manner could do with some improvement.”

Behind him he could hear James and Guin methodically re-Stupefying and double-binding every surviving Death Eater. Hagrid, whose dozens of injuries seemed to be superficial and already healing on their own, stalked through the battlefield crushing every wand he saw.

The dead they ignored.

Harry moved on to a wound in McGonagall’s side. “You really should have gone with Gideon,” he murmured. “You need a real Healer.”

“Mr. Prewett has his hands full enough getting his brother, Black and Mr. Sorner to St. Mungo’s,” she answered tartly. “Besides, there will be uncomfortable questions about our actions here. In my absence, Mr. Potter would feel the need to take charge when the Aurors arrive, and I can’t see that ending without the lot of you in Azkaban by nightfall.”

She hissed as her flesh started knotting itself together.

“Thanks,” he said softly. “For staying.”

He turned his wand to her broken hand. A bone was poking through the skin, but McGonagall hadn’t complained once.

Bloody old bird’s made of iron.

But McGonagall was right that Gideon had his hands full conveying the three badly-injured fighters to Saint Mungo’s. Harry had done his best to stabilize them, but whatever curses Fabian had been hit with had left him barely breathing, Sirius’ blood refused to clot, and he had no idea what was wrong with Marty.

They’ll be okay.

We all made it.
Looking around the clearing, it seemed a miracle they’d all survived. A dozen or two of the Death Eaters had finally broken and run for their ships not long after Harry had charged the wall, but they left behind so many dead and captured that Harry couldn’t even begin to estimate their numbers.

A sudden shout, a flash, and a strangled scream nearly had him jumping through his skin.

He turned in time to see Hagrid bring his foot down heavily on someone. “Gotta a live ‘un here, Guin,” he said.

The woman straightened her robes, blue eyes blinking rapidly. “Yeah…Yeah, thanks for that, Hagrid.” She promptly stunned and bound the Death Eater. Harry grinned, heart still pounding with adrenaline, when she kicked him for good measure.

Everyone turned, wands out, when two people stumbled loudly into the clearing.

“What! What the blazes happened here?” The round-faced man cried. His companion, a young woman in the robes of a trainee Auror, gaped at the carnage.

James Potter made a beeline for the pair.

“And so it begins,” McGonagall groaned. “Help me up, Mr. Aberforth. I’ve had enough healing to be getting on with for now.”

A moment later and she was striding after James, barely a wobble betraying that she was injured.

Harry moved to help Guin deal with the Death Eaters. Their task just happened to take them near the new arrivals.

“Ms. Culpepper, you are as dreadful at listening now as you were in your first year. I shall not repeat it again. The werewolves didn’t attack anyone. They’ve not even left the other side of the island yet!” McGonagall snapped. “Now get in contact with your superiors and tell that we have captured and bound Death Eaters here just waiting for them to come and arrest!”

“Be that as it may, ma’am,” a worried and vaguely familiar male’s voice said, “I’m just…I’m only a junior official with the Creatures Division! And Culpepper is a trainee! This is far above our grade. I was just told to come and do an inventory of the number of dead werewolves!”

James put an arm around the other young man’s shoulders. “Diggory, old chap, you’re completely correct about this being above you. So man up and send a bloody message!”

“I don’t…I don’t know if anyone can come,” the young Auror said quietly. “The battle, last night…we lost.”

Everyone went silent. Hagrid stopped crushing wands mid-stomp.

“Lost?” McGonagall gasped.

The woman nodded. “Yes Professor. I don’t know exactly what happened—just that there was some kind of trap and some of ours died, and lots are injured, and, well, everything’s just in shambles.”

They all looked around a the clearing brimming with bound Death Eaters.

“Well, what the hell do we do with all of them?” Guin asked.

Culpepper shrugged. Diggory had taken off his cap and was twisting it in his hands.
McGonagall, however, only drew her wand and cast twin patronuses. “Go and tell Albus Dumbledore and Minister Crouch that we have approximately four dozen Death Eaters captured alive at the Morar werewolf encampment. We await their assistance.”

“Four dozen!” Diggory squawked, looking around again as though seeing the clearing for the first time. “Against the five of you?”

“Hmm? No,” McGonagall said in distraction as she looked over the unconscious prisoners with a critical eye. “No, there are nine of us in total. Three were injured and taken to St. Mungo’s.”

“Nine of you…” the Auror mouthed, her shining eyes looking at the professor with something akin to worship.

A loud creak sounded across the clearing and drew everyone’s attention to the wall.

One by one, about two dozen men and women filed through the door from the north side of the island, their movements weak and their eyes wide as they took in the carnage.

A tall, stocky man strode forward, dark eyes flashing from a face almost entirely obscured by a thick black beard.

“Ah, Duncan,” Diggory said nervously, “this is official Ministry business. You and your—”

“Explain.”

Diggory’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “Well, you see, I’ve just arrived and haven’t really—”

“Harry? Guin!” a familiar voice cried. Loch pushed through the crowd, an equally worse-for-wear Lupin at his heels, who gaped at his fellow Marauders.

Turning slowly, the bearded man fixed his gaze on Harry. “You, then. Explain.”

After a slight nod from Loch, Harry did just that.

xoxoxox

Huddled out of the way with the Auror trainee, Diggory kept bemoaning that Harry had told the werewolves everything about the Ministry’s plan to use them as a diversion and their decision not to send any help.

The tall man, Duncan, hadn’t said a word throughout his account, and only flicked his eyes to each of the remaining defenders when Harry named them.

“You,” he finally said, “are the wizard who hired Loch.”

“Uh, no. Sir. I was in a coma at the time, but it was Guin here who did.”

“And those three,” Duncan nodded towards James, Sirius, and McGonagall, “came for that one?” He jerked his head in Lupin’s direction.

_Oh. Oh, he really doesn’t sound like he likes Remus._

Harry just nodded.

Silence fell on the clearing again. What sounded like the shimmy of boats through water whispered in the distance.
“And what would you demand for your actions here today? Do you, like that one, want us to join your war against that Dark Lord?”

“Those were His people that came here to kill you,” James exclaimed in confusion. “You must see that you have to—”

“I must do nothing,” Duncan snapped in a low voice. “And I was not speaking to you.”

Harry blinked. “Oh, uh, me then? Well…” He frowned in thought. “I mean, yeah, I don’t think you should side with Voldemort. Look at how he treats those who just want to stay out of the way. But… but, honestly, it’s not like the wizarding world has given you much of a reason to fight for them either, has it?”

_Hell, they seem to treat werewolves just as bad—even worse—than they treat squibs._

The man stared at him with eyes that didn’t seem to blink as much as they should.

“So… I guess you should just do what you think is right? It’s not like I—or any of us—fought so that you would feel obligated to join us. I just,” he shrugged awkwardly. “I just didn’t want Loch or Lupin, or really any innocent person, to die, so I came. That’s pretty much it.”

Duncan surveyed him for a long moment.

The awkward silence was shattered by a blinding flash.

Harry was casting a spell before he even registered anything had happened.

“What did you do to him?” a woman cried in shock.

He blinked, trying to see again, only to find that he—along with Guin, Minerva, and James, it seemed—all had their wands out.

A man was sprawled unconscious, a huge old-fashioned camera lying at his side. Next to him, a blonde woman in an orange animal-skin suit tottered through the mud on spiked heels.

Through eyes watering from the flash, Harry noticed a number of other men and women bustling into the clearing.

Then a virtual swarm of flashbulbs attacked.

“Kitty Corner, _Witch Weekly_, can you tell us what’s happened here?”

“Pultzy Hearst, _Daily Prophet_! Professor McGonagall, are you responsible for this carnage?”

*What the ever living fuck is going—*

“Sylvane Fox, _World Wizarding Wireless_, can you confirm that there has just been a battle against Death Eaters?”

The blonde in the loud orange getup elbowed her way back to the front. “Rita Skeeter over here! _Manchester Ladies’ Bazaar_. Is it true that Hogwarts has allied with the werewolf packs to bring down the Ministry?”

Harry scrubbed his face with his hand.

“Mr. Aberforth,” McGonagall said in a low voice. “Under _no circumstances_ are you to say anything
“He felt the tension as she paused. ‘The same goes for you, Hagrid. You’re both entirely too honest. And not a word from you either, Potter.’ She sighed. ‘Actually…all of you just keep your mouths shut.’

xoxoxox

‘Luckily, Dumbledore and Crouch showed up about then with some Aurors. I guess the reporters had been trying to get them to talk about the Lestrange raid when McGonagall’s patronus interrupted everything. The reporters got to us first.’ Harry closed his eyes, leaning his head onto his boyfriend’s shoulder.

‘That patronus messenger is a good spell, but awful for keeping secrets,’ Gideon mused.

‘Say the blokes talking in public about all this,’ Harry snorted softly, conjuring himself a blanket.

‘Pretty sure that no one is paying us any mind.’

Harry nestled into the soft fabric, trying to ignore the madhouse that was the St. Mungo’s main waiting room. He’s probably right about that.

Witches and wizards with worried eyes filled every chair, waiting to hear about loved ones, while bustling Ministry types clogged the aisles of the waiting area.

Rumour was running rampant. Some said Hogwarts had fallen, others that Voldemort had enslaved the entire Auror corps. Someone across the aisle wouldn’t stop moaning that the Minister’s Heliopath army had rebelled.

All Harry knew for sure was what the Auror trainee had said, and what Dumbledore had briefly confirmed before allowing Harry to escape to check on Gideon and the others. The raid on the Lestrange estate had been a trap that had ended in failure. Some Aurors were dead, many were injured. Beyond that, there was only rumour.

Harry was too exhausted from the battle to feel anything but vague horror through his numbness.

‘Merlin, how much longer do we have to wait to see them?’ Gideon grumbled.

Though a pale and limping Sirius had been discharged some time ago and taken home by James, Fabian and Marty Sorner could look forward to at least a few days in the hospital.

But they’ll be okay.

‘They’re swamped. They’ll let us in when they can.’

In an act of supreme devotion to his boyfriend, Harry shared part of his blanket.

xoxoxox

‘Oh Merlin!’

A squealing voice pulled Harry reluctantly out of his doze.

‘Wow! It’s you! You’re really him!’

A young woman had planted herself in front of them, eyes bright and face flushed.

‘Huh?’ he croaked.
“You—you’re Harry Aberforth!”

Harry had never actually seen someone swoon, but this lady seemed on the verge of it.

“What’re you on about?” Gideon muttered, cracking open his eyes.

“Look, everyone! It’s one of the Heroes of the Lake! Right here in front of me!” She clutched a copy of the Daily Prophet to her chest, eyes fluttering.

Gideon deftly grabbed the newspaper from her hands.

The front page was dominated by a photo of a bloodied and thoroughly dishevelled McGonagall, James, Guin, Hagrid, and Harry surrounded by dozens of captured Death Eaters.

**THE HEROES OF THE LAKE!** screamed the headline.

“Oh, fuck,” Harry choked, eyes widening.

“Hey, that’s mine!” the woman said hotly. “Give it—”

“Sod off,” Gideon snapped. “You can tell all your friends you gave your copy to a hero of the lake.”

As she flounced away, Harry raised an eyebrow. “Bit tetchy there.”

“I was up all night and now we’re stuck here,” Gideon shrugged. “I’m grumpy.”

Turning back to the paper, Harry had to admit, the five of them looked rather… well, **awesome**, what with all the blood and scowling. The smouldering fires and horde of fallen enemies around them didn’t hurt either.

**But Christ, ‘heroes of the lake’? What shite.**

Shite was all too correct, he concluded when he’d finished the article. The five in the picture, along with the four who’d left early, were all being hailed as national heroes for “thwarting a major Death Eater offensive.” Fifty-one Death Eaters had been captured, and twenty-seven killed.

There wasn’t a single mention of werewolves.

Minister Crouch was quoted multiple times praising their actions as part of a “co-ordinated offensive action,” claiming that they had brought “the Ministry one step closer to defeating You-Know-Who for good.”

“The fucking Ministry?” Harry breathed. “The ones who did bugger-all to help?”

Gideon rubbed his eyes and flipped through the rest of the paper while Harry seethed.

“Makes sense,” the redhead finally sighed. “They buried the Lestrange raid in the middle of the paper. Looks like they’re trying to spin Morar as their victory so that people don’t notice their failure.”

“Bloody politics,” Harry spat. “The hospital’s full of worried Auror families and the Ministry’s what? Crossing their fingers hoping that no one else notices?”

“It’s all about image,” Gideon sighed, still scanning the paper. “Just look at the Lestrange article. It’s short and doesn’t say much at all, so most people will see the heroes on the front page and not the… Merlin, sixteen dead Aurors they list on page nine. Oh—*dammit.*”
“What?”

Gideon’s shoulders slumped as he handed Harry the paper.

The article was barely two inches long. Just a brief mention of the more than two dozen injured Aurors and a list of those killed in appallingly small print.

Harry’s eyes landed on a name that stomped the breath out of him.

*Frank Longbottom, aged 25, of Longnor, Staffordshire, Peak District*


“Suppose you wanna know what happened, eh?” Mad-Eye Moody sighed when Harry took the offered seat next to him in the Spell Damage ward.

Harry rubbed his wrists. The ropes Moody had trapped him in the minute he’d arrived had been thankfully vanished, but he knew the bruises would stick around a bit.

“Yes, how… how is she?”

Moody scowled. “Took some of the fire, some of the poison, but she was at the back of the group. Hasn’t woken up yet. S’pose I’m the one to have to tell her about her husband.”

Harry nodded slowly, his mind flitting to Will Armstrong’s fiancé. “I guess you probably have to do that a lot. Tell people that people they love are dead, I mean. I’ve only done it the one time, but…”

“Been to eight houses already today,” Moody finally said, his attention seemingly on the screw in his artificial leg that he was tightening.

He didn’t say anything more.

Harry had been a bartender long enough to know when a man’s words just couldn’t be enough for his thoughts.

The clock on the wall counted up their silence. It was an ugly, boring thing. Harry fleetingly thought of telling Mungo’s they should visit the Prewett brothers.

“You’ve heard it was a trap, right?” the older man said suddenly. “We got in too easy—hardly any of the scum there. We should have suspected something. Instead, the second we get to the inner part of the manor, the whole place goes up in fire and poison clouds and fucking vapour snakes whose bites were bloody real enough.” Moody swore loudly. “Sixteen dead Aurors. Few of my best might never leave the hospital. And I…I got some glass in my hand and that was it.”

Useless words—*It’s not your fault, you can’t blame yourself*—were on Harry’s tongue but he bit them back.

Instead, “Do you think Lucius Malfoy set you up?”

Moody shrugged, a strangely vulnerable gesture that seemed horribly wrong on the man. “I’m thinking not, but who knows? I’ll probably get sent to France to interrogate his wife tomorrow, but I couldn’t give a single shit about him today.”

They sat for a while longer until Moody fixed him with both his eyes. “You should get on home. She
won’t wake for a few hours, and her mum’ll be here. You have a lot more to worry about.”

Well that doesn’t sound ominous at all.

“Hell, kid, don’t be an idiot,” Moody said with an exaggerated roll of his magical eye. “You lot took out, what, seventy-some Death Eaters in a single night? Got your picture and your name in the Prophet? Honestly, I’m surprised that none of them came after you for what happened in the Ministry. Now though? Now you and yours will have some awfully big targets on your back.”

Harry’s body went cold. We should have used glamours.

“Go home. Get yourself and the others as protected as you can. They’ll be after you, Aberforth. Mark my words.”

xoxoxox

5 December, 1979

The next morning, after a long night of shoring up what protections he could place on the Head and still remain accessible to the public, Harry found himself staring at the cover the Daily Prophet once again.

Lucius Malfoy’s blond hair blew gently in the wind, his head atop a pike set just at the edge of the Hogwarts wards.

I guess he really did mean to come to our side.

Christ.

It struck him that Draco Malfoy would never get to threaten anyone with his father hearing about anything.

Damn.

Sighing, he topped off his coffee and turned the page.

xoxoxox

7 December, 1979

It was snowing, thick and lazy, the day that Frank Longbottom was buried.

Harry would never have guessed that Moody could be eloquent, but his eyes pricked as the man addressed the crowd.

He could see Alice up at the front, her hair a pale shock of gold in a world of white snow and black robes.

Harry didn’t really think that Alice was seeing anything at all that day.

Later, when the speeches were over and respects had been paid, he considered approaching her. But the look in her eyes reminded him all too sharply of how he’d felt at Ab’s funeral, so he hung back and allowed others to swarm her.

He couldn’t say the words he wanted to anyway.
I really thought I could save him, Alice.

I’m so sorry I couldn’t.

That night, he and Gideon curled into each other for a long time, neither spoke but nor did either sleep.

xoxoxox

14 December, 1979

Harry opened the door and had to double-check the sign to make sure that, yes, this is the Head.

Sure, it was a Friday, but it was hardly gone five in the evening. There was no way the pub should be this packed.

And certainly not with what appeared to be a veritable flock of witches, sipping wine and gillywater, who all turned to watch him as he elbowed his way to the bar. Everywhere he looked there was the glitter of jewels and the shine of painted lips.

“What the hell is this?” he shouted to Doc over a racket that had too many giggles and not enough profanity.

The man just shook his head as he finished prepping a tea service.

Tea.

Tea in the Head on a Friday night.

Shit, am I in another new universe?

Pel and a mostly-healed Marty Sorner laughed, the latter tossing Harry a copy of Witch Weekly. “It came out this morning.”

Hogsmeade’s Hero! the cover proclaimed over a full-colour picture of Harry tidying up outside the Head, looking as he always did in the everyday work robes he’d scrounged from the bargain bin at Jinky’s Jumble. The secrets to Harry’s effortless style, p. 6!

“This…can’t be real,” he managed. “Right guys?”

“Sure is.” Pel grinned. “An’ there’s a photo spread on pages six through nine.”

“Fabian’s going to go spare they didn’t include him,” Loch said. “Oh, and don’t forget Teen Witch—there’s a pull-out poster in that one.”

Pel’s smile got even wider as he showed off a glossy magazine featuring Harry’s face.

“I’m thinking we should hang it over the bar,” Doc mused. “Gives the place a little something extra.”

“But—but—why?” Harry sputtered. A trio of women by the bar wouldn’t stop whispering and smiling. One winked at him.

“You’re famous now, Harry,” Pel said. “That Prophet picture an’ all. You an’ the others captured just about every suspected Death Eater in Britain! They aren’t going to focus on Potter since he’s married or Hagrid since he’s, well, Hagrid, but as far as they know, you’re—"
“—the ‘Bad Boy of Hogsmeade,’” Doc interrupted.

“The what?”

“Page six,” Loch said mildly. “You own one of the dodgiest pubs in Britain, but you’re a hero now. Thus, the Bad Boy of Hogsmeade.”

Harry could barely hear the din of the bar over the sound of Ab laughing in his head.

There wasn’t enough Firewhiskey in the world.

“Oi, heartbreaker!” Guin appeared from the kitchens, Rhys strapped to her chest. “Little help down here!”

The heat of the glares his new clientele shot Guin should have incinerated her. She just grinned.

The kitchen had never felt so safe. “Thanks for rescuing me.”

“You wish. I need help making these ridiculous sandwiches.”

Slicing cucumbers to the sound of Guin humming for the baby was a welcome respite, and Harry felt the knots in his shoulders slowly loosening.

“What happened?”

He startled out of the reverie he’d fallen into. “Huh? I mean, come on, Guin. You saw all those women—”

“Not them. Something else happened, it’s all over your face. Out with it.”

*Can’t keep anything hidden from the bloody woman.*

Harry sighed. “I stopped in to see Alice today. She took a position as one of the permanent Auror guards at the school. I don’t think she wants to, you know, go home right now.”

“And?”

Harry chewed over his words. “She was practicing, that’s all. But, I dunno, her eyes were just—”

*Dead*

“—cold, I guess. Everything about her was just…a little mad. I almost didn’t recognize her.”

*And the curses she was using on the practice dummies definitely weren’t legal. And they were way worse than my kind of illegal.*

“Honestly, what do you expect? Her husband was killed! *Of course* she’s gone a little mad. I certainly would if it were Doc.” Guin rolled her eyes. “Look at you—you lost Ab and buggered off with pirates for months! Give her time. You’re going to see her again?”

He nodded, knowing Guin was right but still unsettled by the ghost Alice seemed to have become. “She wants to spar with me. After Christmas.”

“Well, just keep an eye on her and try your best to help. You know as well as anyone that you can’t make a person deal with something like this the way you want them to.”
“Yeah, okay.” Harry bit his lip. “So, er, what should we do about all the…new customers? How can we get rid of them?”

“Get rid of them? Are you insane?” Guin’s grin was all teeth. “I’ve made sure to triple the prices on tea, wine, gillywater, and finger sandwiches. At this rate, our house will be done by Christmas!”

Harry stared. “That’s…hell, Guin, that’s a lot of money.”

“Heroing finally pays off, I guess.” She plopped a tray of food in his hands. “Now take your effortlessly stylish arse upstairs and keep raking in the coins. I have a new house to decorate.”

xoxoxox

25 December 1980

That should do it.

Stepping back, Harry cast a critical eye on his handiwork.

True to Head tradition, he’d found the most pathetic wreck of a fir tree in the Forest and loaded it to hell and back with lights, ornaments, garlands, and chocolate galleons. The wretched thing was nearly buckling under the weight of the finery.

The charms on the pub’s door suddenly sounded.

“We’re closed until this afternoon!” Harry called, wand in hand.

Albus’ face, cheeks red with cold, peered through the front window.

A few moments later and the headmaster was vanishing the snow he’d tracked inside.

“My apologies for disturbing you on Christmas morning, Harry,” he began, declining tea with a sharp shake of his head. “But I discovered something last night and wanted to inform you as soon as possible.”

“Something about horcruxes?” Harry hadn’t managed to research with him since before the Morar battle, but up until then he and Albus had been exhausting themselves just trying to find anything on them.

“He didn’t make one I’m sure of it.” The headmaster shushed Harry as he made to interrupt. “Horcruxes keep one from dying, yes, but the body can still be obliterated. The source I’ve just translated is explicit that a ritual is required to return to an embodied state.”

“So there’s no way he could have just gotten right back up after a Killing Curse,” Harry surmised, taking a seat next to the headmaster. “Is this a good or a bad thing?”

Albus sighed. “It means we must keep looking. It occurred to me this morning that Tom was rumoured to have spent quite some time in South America upon his graduation.” The man drew a shrunken stack of books out of his pocket. “I suggest we look through magics peculiar to that continent.”

Harry stared balefully at them balefully. “Just what I wanted for Christmas… Oh, that reminds me,” he summoned a small present from under the tree and handed it to Albus, “Happy Christmas.”

The old man’s eyes widened as he unwrapped the package to find three pairs of woollen socks. Harry was oddly proud of the lurid fish, geese, and bison patterns.
Albus slowly removed his spectacles and stared at the socks.

“This is…unexpected, Harry. In all truth, I was unsure of the welcome I would receive this morning, given our last meeting.”

“Yeah.” Harry toyed with the discarded ribbon from Albus’ present. “I was pretty arsed off. I get that you set it up so that we would know to go to Morar. It’s just…I hate politics. I hate the games and the lies and all that shite. I trust you, I do, but then sometimes you’re just the biggest bastard, and I—”

“—you feel as though you’ve been played the fool?” Albus interrupted. He didn’t wait for an answer. “I’m very familiar with fearing that a person you like and trust has misrepresented himself, has concealed the truth for his own hidden reasons.”

Oh.

“Yeah…” He coughed awkwardly. “Yeah, I mean, I know about you and Grindelwald…”

“Gellert?” The headmaster’s eyes twinkled as he laughed. “Oh no, Harry, I was speaking of you.”

What?

“I think,” Albus mused, his light tone underlaid with steel, “that we are the pair of us, as Aberforth would say, bastards. You should know that I shall continue to fight this war however I can, politics and all. Nor will I apologize for it. I also suppose that you will continue as you have done, being a brave and admirable young liar.”

Harry’s mind was racing but he couldn’t form thoughts, let alone words.

“But…perhaps we can also both be fools, and continue to trust each other.” The old man looked down at the obnoxious socks and smiled softly. “I would like that.”

“We’re back!” Guin’s voice suddenly rang out from the stable stairs, saving Harry from coming up with something to say. Moments later, she and Doc, along with Pel, Marty, Dalcop, and Wigol Palter, trooped in. “I showed them the whole house, and of course everyone loved it, but who wouldn’t because it’s perfect and the security charms worked perfectly until I let them through and—”

Harry didn’t register the rest of Guin’s commentary about the newly-completed Dearborn House. Albus was already on his feet, tucking the socks into his pocket.

“Are you coming back for the party tonight, sir?” Doc asked a bit awkwardly.

“Alas, I believe I—”

“You should come,” Harry heard himself saying. Raising his face, he looked into the headmaster’s eyes. “Really. It’ll be fun. And it’s Christmas.”

Albus nodded slowly, that same soft smile on his lips. “In that case, perhaps I shall.”

xoxoxox

Harry looked around in satisfaction. The Head’s party was in full swing, the pub packed to the rafters with the usual crowd of drunks, deadbeats, and dark creatures who had nowhere else to go on Christmas.
But for once, it wasn’t just them.

Albus was hunched over in a booth with Hagrid and Filch Filch. Argus shot Harry a nasty little grin as the headmaster stared helplessly at the Scrabble board in front of him.

Harry handed him a stout from his tray. “Consolation prize.”

“Indeed,” Albus sighed. “I shall have to practice before next year.”

Harry moved on.

Pel was chatting with Lily and, toHarry’s continued bemusement, Griselda Marchbanks. He’d frozen in his tracks when she’d hobbled into the pub, but the ancient woman had just arched an eyebrow and barked for her special tea. The unlikely trio were going on about some bit of wizarding law that went way over his head, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“Bloody bastard!” James Potter cried from the other side of the pub. Harry turned to see him pulling a dart out of his arse. Sirius gave a florid bow as Lupin and a handful of werewolves from Morar laughed.

Poppy Pomfrey seemed torn between laughing and scowling as she bustled over.

Harry managed to evade Caffrey Burke’s wandering hands and dazzling grin as he dropped off drinks for the pirate captain and his vampire companions. The entirely too beautiful group seemed to be simultaneously playing poker and competing to see who could drape themselves most seductively over their chairs.

“Still such a prude!” Caffrey groused. “I’m crushed. And here I came all this way thinking you were a bad boy now!”

“That joke’s already gone stale, Captain,” Harry shot back as he made his escape. “But I guess we can’t help but lose touch once we reach a certain age.”

Burke’s indignant sputters were lost in the din.

Damn. Didn’t realise I’d missed him so much.

“Molly dear, we really should get back. Leaving the children with Bilius…” Arthur Weasley was saying as his noticeably-pregnant wife cooed over Rhys.

“Oh tosh, he can handle another fifteen minutes!” Molly said dismissively. “Certainly we have time for just a smidge more freedom.”

Smiling, Harry started elbowing his way back to the bar.

“—not scared, love. I’m proud to be the sort of person who’ll stand on a wall between werewolves and Death Eaters. Though all I could think of when it was happening was how... empty my life has been. Now, now I want to be a better man, to find love—”

Oh good lord.

Fabian winked at him through the gaggle of starry-eyed young witches.

I’ve created a monster.

By speaking loudly and often about his fellow “hero of the lake,” Harry had shaken much of the
unwanted attention off himself, and given Fabian what the claimed was “the best Christmas present ever.”

Practically shoving his tongue down his boyfriend’s throat a few times in the middle of Hogsmeade had helped as well.

And Gideon had taken to spending all his nights in Harry’s bed just to avoid awkward morning encounters with scantily-dressed women, so really, everyone was happy.

Slipping behind the bar, Harry got fresh pints for Dalcop and Wigol Palter, who both seemed content enough just watching the party around them.

“Happy Christmas, barkeep.”

Lily, smiling softly despite looking a bit peaky, plopped down on a stool.

“I’m still surprised you came,” he said with a grin.

“It wasn’t that hard to convince James. I think coming here makes him feel dangerous,” she giggled.

“So, what’ll it be? Just another tea?”

Lily nodded, but he couldn’t help noticing her hands absently picking a bar napkin to shreds.

“Can’t see why you won’t at least let me add a little something extra to it,” he observed. “It’s a party, Lily, and you’ve been drinking tea of all things.”

“Yeah, er, no. I mean, no thanks. I’m...well I’m rather off alcohol at the moment.”

“A Teetotalist now?” Harry widened his eyes as though hurt. “A pub owner’s least favorite patron!”

Her laugh was not right.

“Well, I can’t drink, Harry, though honestly I would love a shot of something...” She scowled at his blank look. “Oh for goodness’ sake, you really are thick sometimes, you know that? I can’t drink because I’m pregnant.”

From somewhere very far away he heard Wig giggling.

pregnant pregnant pregnant

“Huhwhoa…”

His mind recognized that this wasn’t the most intelligent response even as it continued to chant the word.

“Strangely, that’s pretty much what James said,” Lily said crisply. “So...yeah. Having a baby. We’re not telling people yet, but I, well, I really wanted you to know.” She’d started tearing another napkin, he noticed in distraction. “I’m due the first week of August.”

“That’s…” He fought for something to say, leaning back against the wall since his knees had become noodles. “That’s weird.”

Her flat look spoke volumes.

“Sorry,” he said, scrubbing his face with a shaking hand. “But it is. I’m—”
“—I’m really, really happy for you.” His head felt too heavy and his legs too light, but he knew that this was true. “And you know I think you and James will be...well, you’ll be great.”

Lily grabbed his hand and held on for several heartbeats, her eyes suspiciously misty. She seemed to want to say something, but finally shook her head and tipped her tea his way.

He nodded, not sure exactly about what he was acknowledging, only that it was good.

*I’m happy. I really am happy for them,* he thought as he watched his mother-but-not-his-mother rejoin Pel and Madame Marchbanks.

“You al’righ’ there, Harry?” Dalcop slurred, probably the first time Harry’d heard him speak more than a word in months.

“Yeah, I am actually….” He trailed off, still blinking more than was really necessary, almost enjoying the absolute strangeness of it all, “Though sometimes life is just really fucked up.”

Dalcop nodded heavily while Wig raised a glass in a silent toast.

The night wore on, the laughter grew louder, the faces redder, and the spirits flowed. By midnight someone had scrounged up a radio so that the pub could listen to the questionable selection provided by Wizarding Wireless.

Couples took to the dance floor. Albus twirled Minerva to the beat of a horrible polka, Molly and Arthur—who still hadn’t left yet—looked happily ridiculous dancing to a cheesy love song, and Doc and Guin danced every song, their eyes on each other alone. Caffrey Burke seemed to be competing with Fabian to see which could break more hearts in a single evening, and Sirius looked to be taking notes on their strategies. James, meanwhile, was proving that Harry’s two-left feet may truly be genetic, though Lily seemed to love every minute of his attempt.

Harry watched it all—watched them all—in the glow of candles and Christmas lights, a gentle fall of snow peeking in through frosted windows.

A rustle next to him, then an arm around his shoulders.

“What are you doing?” Gideon asked.

The firelight glinted in his hair.

“I’m...” Harry paused, feeling for the right word. “I’m basking.”

Gideon smiled. “Was going to see if you fancied a dance, but I’d hate to interrupt a perfectly good bask.”

“The best present I can give you is me *not* dancing.”

They settled into each other, eyes on the pub full of flushed faces and ringing laughter.

“Bask away, then.”
Thanks as always to the wonderful Averagefish for beta-reading this chapter, check out their time travel fic More Than One Way to Skin a Cat and other stories over on fanfiction.net.

Note: “Planning was hard.” A deliberate tip of the hat to Harry’s “planning is easy,” line in Stages of Hope, one of the classic HP Dimension Traveling fanfics.

Unnecessarily Long Note on Loch Morar: Loch Morar is a large, rather remote lake in the western highlands of Scotland. I chose it for two reasons: 1) there were a handful of popular reports about werewolves in its vicinity in the mid-twentieth century, and 2) while no one knows where Hogwarts really was supposed to be, the lake is somewhat close to one of the best-argued theories for its location that I’ve heard. Seriously, check this out:
This person put way more thought into it than I thought possible.
Morar is also close to Loch Shiel, which served as the ‘black lake’ in the films.

As I know nothing about strategy (which may be very apparent, apologies), the fight at Loch Morar was inspired by the Battle of Agincourt in the Hundred Years’ War, which relied on what would become one of the more famous uses of a chokepoint strategy in history. The muddy ground especially slowed down the French, and was the inspiration for some of the defenders’ traps. If you’re interested, here’s a link to the island where I set the action, with the choke point easily visible:
https://goo.gl/maps/VavbGMSZ7BzyySeA7

Two notes on what’s coming:

Upcoming Cliff-hangers: Starting in the next chapter we’re getting to the point where things move quickly and events start compounding. Practically speaking, what this means is that the most of the chapters up to the climax are necessarily cliff-hangers, as there’s no satisfying stopping point.

Upcoming Character Deaths: Every chapter up to the epilogue has at least one character death (either a canon principal, secondary, or side character, or one of my OCs). I don’t think any are as upsetting as Ab’s death, but I’m also rather too close to judge.

Next on The Second String: It’s the cold, wet winter of 1980 in Chapter 38, “Toujours.”

And thank you for reading my story, and especially to those who have commented. I’m horribly behind in responding, but I truly appreciate them.
XXXVIII. *Toujours*

**18 January, 1980**

“Oh hell, she’s back,” Harry grumbled in an undertone.

“Whozzit?” Dalcop slurred.

“Oh…just this weird bird who checked into one of the rooms earlier today,” he replied vaguely. His eyes were glued to the younger Sibyl Trelawney, who was gliding through a packed Friday night crowd—

*Attempting to glide*, he amended when she walked into a table of vampires and ended up half in Sanguini’s lap.

The regulars at the bar watched the young woman extract herself from the vampire’s arms, only to spill Panty’s drink.

“Aye,” Pel said in a thoughtful voice, “but take off the specs an’ the scarves, an’ she’d be a right fine-looking lady, even for a—what’re they called? A dippie?”


Harry gaped at the solicitor in horror. “No. No! I can’t believe you’d think…That’s it, old man, you’ve had enough to drink for the night.”

Pel cradled his pint to his chest. “Oi! Just voicing an opinion, lad!”

“Yeah, Harry, let the boys who aren’t bent decide these things,” Marty grinned. “I agree with Pel. Bit of a re-do, some potion in her hair, and she’d be a real looker.”

*Traitors! Betrayers!*

“Belt up, girl’s coming this way,” Doc muttered.

Harry groaned and busied himself with…something.

“Good barkeep,” Trelawney said in the same misty voice that had always set his teeth on edge, “might I trouble you for a glass of sherry? I have Seen that tonight the stars and Fates shall dance in concert, and I shall need the steadiness of spirits.”

Harry rolled his eyes as Doc goggled at the woman. The Head was hardly the sort of place that stocked sherry.

“Er, ‘course, Miss. I think my wife keeps some in the kitchen…” Before Harry could volunteer to get it, Doc was off.

*Another traitor.*
At the other end of the bar, Wigol Palter openly giggled. Pel, however, simply raised an eyebrow and shifted closer to her. “Are you a Seer then, my dear? Quite an honourable calling, that is.”

_Oh my God._

_Is he…no he can’t be._

_No, he is! Pel’s flirting with Trelawney!_

Her huge eyes glittered as the rest of her face assumed what she clearly thought was grave solemnity. “I confess, I am but a Conduit for Forces greater than myself, good sir.”

Remembering the prophecy she’d given about Wormtail in his third year, Harry admitted that her modesty, however feigned, was at least accurate this time.

“How fascinating,” Pel continued. “I’d just love to hear more—”

_That’s it, I’m banning Pel from the Head._

_Is the only way._

Suddenly Trelawney’s misty gaze zeroed in on Harry. “You there, boy!” _Oh for fuck’s sake._

“Beware a red-haired man! I…yes, my Inner Eye _Sees_ that in the near future you shall not come out on top in an encounter with one, my dear!”

Marty whistled low and even Dalcop smiled. Pel’s grin was as bright as Trelawney’s glittering rings. “Damn, she’s good, isn’t she, Harry?”

“Hardly,” he huffed. “Hell, I could have told you _that._”

Trelawney blinked in confusion at the raucous laughter that erupted around her.

The old solicitor patted her on the hand. “Don’t mind them, my dear. So, what’s a fine lady like yourself doing in a dive like this?”

_Yep. Definitely going to have to ban him. No one should ever say something like that out loud._

Trelawney drew her shawls around her shoulders with exaggerated dignity. “I have come to interview with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, for I have Seen that I shall earn a position as a Divination instructor in the near future.” She glanced around the rowdy public room. “Alas, my funds at present are a trifle low, so I have been compelled to seek accommodation here. The Fates upheld that today’s foul weather will continue, so the headmaster has been kind enough to arrange our meeting here.”

Harry rolled his eyes again.

“Divination?” Marty wondered. “Anyone hear that ol’ Pemphredo’s leaving? You know anything about it, Wig?”

Muttering something no one could decipher, Wig took a swig of his drink and went back to sketching on a napkin.

Doc returned with Trelawney’s sherry, which she paid for with a carefully-counted stack of knuts before turning back towards the staircase.

“While I expect I shall See the headmaster before he arrives, do be so kind as to send him to my
“It was a true pleasure to make your acquaintance, my dear,” Pel said loudly before turning back to Harry. “You keep rolling your eyes that much and you’ll give yourself a headache.”

“Your attempt at flirting has already withered my soul,” he shot back.

“Think I liked you better when you were a squib, lad,” Pel huffed into his beer as Harry shot him a two-finger salute.

The Friday night crowd continued to grow despite the freezing rain that had been pummeling Scotland for days. Between letting rooms to Yarda and a silent young man who refused to meet his eyes, Harry was kept on his toes filling drinks and sending food orders to Guin in the kitchen.

At some point he noticed Albus expertly hopping out of his Floo and jerked a thumb towards the stairs. “Your…appointment’s waiting in the Gray Room, last door at the end of the hall.”

He’d just managed to stop an impending brawl between two of the men playing poker at the corner table when Guin caught his eye by the back hallway.

“What? Have you got the order of fried—”

“No!” she pulled him down towards the kitchen stairs. “Ariana just told me that the man in the Blue Room’s face melted into another person’s, and then he just disappeared, but his door opened by itself!”

Melted… “Polyjuice, you think? And he can’t Disapparate inside the Head…so Disillusioned maybe?”

Guin nodded. “I’ve got her visiting all the paintings to see if she can figure out where he went, but…”

“Um…how about this—you be Doc’s backup in the pub in case anything happens. Loch’s got Rhys at your place, right?”

She nodded quickly.

“Okay, good. So just go be ready to get everyone out if we need to. I’ll go upstairs and poke around.”

He threaded his way back through the public room, avoiding the drunken gropes of his more persistent young female fans, and skirting through a boisterous group of werewolves who were bent on shaking his hand.

The din from the pub dropped to a low hum as he entered the second floor sitting room and silently peaked into the hallway that led to the guest rooms.

It was completely empty.

I should have Disillusioned myself too!

Fuck it. Too late now.

Movement caught his eye. Slipping into her frame, Ariana gave an exaggerated shrug.
He crept into the hallway as quietly as possible and approached the door at the far end, a chink of light shining out from the gap between it and the floor.

His eyes narrowed. Something large and invisible was blocking part of the light.

 Someone is here.

As he raised his wand and crept closer, Trelawney’s voice, unnaturally harsh and deep, suddenly sounded through the hall.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches—”

A single flick and a silent *Finite* raced towards the unseen spy.

“Born to those—”

It felt like a fuse in him had ignited as Harry watched a now-visible Severus Snape whip around, wand in hand.

“—who have thrice defied him—”

Furious that the man was spying in *his home* just weeks after he’d spared him, Harry forgot entirely that he was a wizard and launched himself bodily at Snape.

“—born as the seventh month dies—”

Taken completely by surprise, Snape fell back under Harry’s weight. As one, they crashed through the window at the end of the hallway and slammed down onto the street below.

Snape recovered first. Snarling, he brought his knee up hard into Harry’s groin and scrambled for his own dropped wand. The taller man was already on his feet and Disapparating before Harry could roll to his knees, eyes streaming and limbs shaking.

“Cuh-come back,” he wheezed in vain. “Come back, you coward, and fuh-fight!”

He was vaguely glad the man didn’t oblige him, given that curling into a ball and moaning seemed a far better course of action.

Eventually turning his head at the sound of voices, he realised that the entire Friday night crowd had spilled out onto Low Street.

“Now that jus’ wasn’t right,” one patron slurred.

“Stinkin,’ scummy thing ter do,” another agreed.

Rushing forward, Guin helped him stumble painfully to his feet. “Oh, Harry. The window? Really?”

“Your…cuh-concern for my bollocks is touching, Gw-Guin,” he coughed. *Oh God. I may vomit.*

She sniffed as she led him through the parting crowd. “I’ll let Gideon worry about them, luv.”

He huffed a humourless laugh that left his groin hurting all the more, and looked up to see Albus watching sympathetically from the broken window.

xoxoxox
The door to the Blue Room closed softly behind Guin.

Harry sighed into the silence, letting himself sink gingerly onto the bed.

Sibyl Trelawney had been terrified by the interruption to her interview and had refused to stay a moment longer in a building so “cursed by Fate.” Dumbledore arranges a room for her in the Three Broomsticks, and Pel, the old bastard, had extended his arm to escort the lady to her new lodgings.

Now Albus was poking about the room Snape had let for the evening in case the man had left any clues.

“You know he’s a Death Eater, right?” Harry finally asked. Dumbledore merely hummed and cast some sort of detection spell on the empty bureau. “He was at Loch Morar. I saw him during the battle, but—

*I let him go, I fucking let him go!*

“—but I had other things I had to do, so he got away. Besides, I wasn’t sure if he worked for you.”

“I am unsurprised Mr. Snape has chosen that path, though I did not know for certain he had pledged his allegiance to Tom until very recently. Some of those captured at the lake identified him as Death Eater when questioned under Veritaserum.”

Nodding, Harry closed his eyes.

“Incidentally, you should know that there are only about twenty named Death Eaters who remain at large. All the rest you and the others either captured or killed.”

*Christ. No wonder we still haven’t heard from Voldemort. He’s probably out recruiting again.*

He could only bring himself to use what little energy he had to cast a cooling charm on his groin.

Albus sighed as he finally sat down in an armchair. “How much do you think Mr. Snape overheard? Perhaps just a flighty young woman’s nattering?”

Harry’s head was starting to ache as much as his testicles. “Doubt it. I heard the whole ‘one to vanquish the Dark Lord’ bit loud and clear. Yeah, we were distracted, but I got the parents defying and seventh month dying parts, too.”

“So I must assume Mr. Snape did as well.”

Harry’s eyebrows arched when the Headmaster uttered a low string of profanity that would have made Ab proud.

Groaning, he pulled himself into a sitting position. “Did she say anything else important that we missed?”

Another few choice words followed as Albus put his head in his hands. “I heard nothing after ‘and the Dark Lord will mark.’ She said more, but you had fallen through the window, and I ran into the hallway.”

“Oh Albus, were you worried about me?” Harry asked, a teasing lilt to his tone.

Dumbledore only smiled wryly at the taunt.

*He was worried. He left her to check on me. Huge mistake, but…* a tingle of warmth filled his chest.
“I believe the Department of Mysteries tracks and records prophecies in some way. I shall have to investigate and see if they have any knowledge of the rest of Miss Trelawney’s prediction. Until then,” Albus sighed, “we can at least be heartened by the fact that Voldemort, at best, will only have the same partial prophecy as we do.”

“So, what were her exact words?”

After Albus repeated them, the two lapsed into a contemplative silence. Harry’s mind, however, was more on the things he’d like to do to Snape if ever got his hands on the git.

“I can only think of one principal line of interpretation, though I’ve no doubt there are others,” Albus finally said. “Given the mention of parents and the rather clear indication of a July birthday, I assume that Miss Trelawney was referring to child about to be born this summer.”

In the next few moments, Harry was pretty sure that he invented new swear words, though he at least didn’t say them out loud.

*Born as July ‘dies’? Marked? And…and Lily and James have defied Voldemort at least twice that I know of…*

*Did my parents do the same thing?*

Horror skittered down his spine.

*That’s why he came on Halloween. If this prophecy existed in my world and he learned of it…*

*He came for me.*

*Not them.*

*Me.*

*Because of a stupid fucking prophecy about some great ‘Dark Lord vanquisher’ approaching!*  

Before guilt could set in, however, another thought set his heart to thudding.

*Wait…*

The prophecy thundered through his mind.

*Oh, no bloody way.*

Harry closed his eyes, unsure if he wanted to laugh or cry.

*Or get blind, stupid drunk.*

*Goddammit all.*

“Harry? Have you thought of something?”

*Yes, I need to get drunk right now. Oh fuck.*

He blinked and came back to himself. “No, not really.” *Liar!* “Just thinking that Divination is rubbish field of study.”

*Calm down. Think about it when you’re calm.*
Albus huffed a laugh. “I must agree. When Professor Pemphredo informed me that she would not be available to teach after this year, I’d hoped to do away with the subject entirely. Unfortunately, Miss Trelawney is the descendant of a celebrated Seer, and I was forced to do her the courtesy of an interview. Even more unfortunately, she actually seems to have talent.”

The prospect of Trelawney’s looming tenure was enough to distract him from the whirlwind of his thoughts.

_Merlin, he’s really going to hire her. Those poor, poor students._

“Broken clocks and all that, Albus.”

“Indeed.” The older man sat back, rubbing his face tiredly. “Prophecies, of all things! Killing another, even in war, is not to be done lightly, but compared to turns like these, it is at least tempting in its simplicity.”

“Been there, tried that,” Harry deadpanned. “Bloody git just got right back up again.”

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a moment before he doubled over with a full, rich laugh.

“Fair enough, fair enough,” he gasped, wiping at his eyes.

_xoxoxox

“I don’t believe this,” Lily muttered the next day, looking helplessly around the Head’s stable at Gideon and Pel. “Seriously, a _prophecy_?”

Pel grinned. “It’s a magical world my dear. Stranger things.”

“And you think that’s why You-Know-Who killed us—I mean, your Lily and James—in your world? Because he thought it was about you?”

Harry could only shrug. “Well, yeah. Why else would he come to kill a baby? I was born as the ‘seventh month dies,’ and I’m guessing my mum and dad did defy him three times. I mean, you and James have already defied him at least twice, right?”

Lily shifted awkwardly. “Um, no. No, we’ve actually each defied him three times, I think. We fought him on the Hogsmeade raid when we were still in school and at Gringotts. For the third time...well, I shot spells at him during the Ministry Invasion. James didn’t—he was guarding against Death Eaters—but, well, don’t tell anyone, but in his seventh year _He_ tried to recruit James.”

“As soon as Dumbledore finds out you’re pregnant, he’s going to think it’s you,” Harry concluded. He suddenly remembered that Neville was born really close to him. And fuck, weren’t his parents attacked right after mine were? “Well, you or Alice.”

“Alice?” Lily’s brow crinkled. “Harry...Alice isn’t pregnant.”

He stared at her, for a moment sure that she was speaking a different language. “No, she is—I shared a dorm with Neville for _four years._”

“She can’t be, Harry,” Gideon said quietly, eyes solemn. “Frank died almost two months ago. She’d definitely be off active Auror duty by now if she were.”

“But-but,” he floundered, needing to somehow convince them. “But Neville—he’s a really good bloke...he can’t just...”
"I’m so sorry," Lily said, her hand unconsciously rubbing her own stomach.

"Yeah," he muttered. His thoughts kept flying away from him, half-formed and desperate, but all shadowed by the sense that the world had lost something.

"Now’s not the time to lose it, kid," Caff Burke’s voice chastised in his mind.

Breathing deeply, he forced the image of Neville’s face out of his thoughts.

"Bugger all this," Harry cursed. "It doesn’t matter! All that matter is that if Snape tells Voldemort, he’ll eventually target you, Lily." He ran a hand through his hair so roughly that several strands came up from the roots. "Dammit, it doesn’t even matter who the prophecy’s actually about, or even if it’s a steaming pile of shit! You and James are in danger, because Tom’s going to believe it could be true!"

Lily threw her hands up, her green eyes flashing. "Yes, I see that, Harry! But what do you want us to do about it?"

"Hide."

Though it was barely more than a whisper, the word seemed to fill the stable.

"What? You can’t be serious! Harry, we’re in a war, we can’t possibly just—"

"You can. You will," Harry snapped. "I get that James will still come out to fight when he’s needed, and that you’ll do the same once your kid is born. Fine. I don’t like it, but fine."

Pel shifted awkwardly.

"But you will hide. And hide well. Hide better than you did last time. Real protections, not just a Fidelius."

Gideon seemed to want to say something, but Harry’s attention was riveted to Lily.

She was so pale with indignation that the freckles stood out starkly on her face. "Dammit, Harry, we have lives, we can’t just—"

—"Take Harry and run!"—

His father’s frantic voice, his mother’s pleas when Voldemort had come cut through his mind and he nearly swayed from the force of it.

"Mum."

Her eyes widened in shock.

—"Stand aside, you silly girl!"—

—"Avada Kedavra!"—

Harry’s hands shook.

"Mum, do this for me.” He stared at her, desperation scrawled across his face. “Please.”
The stable fell into silence.

“...Okay,” she finally said. She seemed to snap back into herself with a sharp shake of her head. “Okay, Harry. I’ll—I’ll tell Albus I’m pregnant. Maybe he can give James and me rooms at the school.”

He nodded tightly, lips pressed together and eyes closed, before he finally forced himself to breathe. “Thank you.”

Pel’s cough shattered the moment, to Harry’s relief, but it was Gideon who spoke up.

“So...so does this mean that only this baby—our dimension’s you, I guess, Harry—can defeat Him? If it does—”

“We’re well and truly humped,” Pel finished for him.

Lily scowled. “My baby hasn’t even been born yet! I’m not going to let anyone—”

“If,” Harry interrupted loudly, “if we take this prophecy seriously, which is a big ‘if’...” He paused and took a deep breath. “…there is another way to interpret it.”

All three stared at him.

“Think about the first line especially,” he prompted. ‘‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.’ Albus thought that meant a baby that’s going to be born because of the parents bit, but—”

Gideon’s grey eyes were round as saucers. “Oh hell,” he breathed. “Fucking hell.”

“What? What am I missing?” Lily demanded, her glance darting back and forth between them.

The redhead sighed. ‘‘The prophecy started the moment Harry—this Harry—began approaching the room. And his parents, like you and James, probably did defy their Dark Lord three times, and he was born on the last day of July.’’

Pel let out a low whistle. “It’s about you, lad, isn’t it? It’s not about a baby born in this world at all.”

“I don’t know that,” he admitted. “Without the rest of the prophecy, we can’t know anything for sure.”

A very strange look crossed Pel’s face, but Harry was too focused on his own frustration to really care. “But honestly...yeah, it could be about me. But I don’t see why it matters. Maybe it’s about some baby, or something none of us have even thought of!” His smile was bitter. “It could also be utter shite.”

“So what do we do?” Lily asked.

“We do as we have done,” Gideon responded immediately. “Keep fighting. Though you and James go into hiding in case Voldemort finds out and puts stock in the prophecy.”

Lily’s face fell at that. “Do—do you think that Snape will tell him?” Harry reared up to speak, but Lily just continued more loudly. “I know he’s a Death Eater, Harry, I know, okay? But...but he was my best friend. It’s just...maybe he’s still, I don’t know...” she floundered for the words, her eyes shining with tears.

He wanted to snap back at her that she had shite taste in friends, that Snape was a foul little git who
even as an adult delighted in mistreating kids. But he couldn’t forget that the man in his world must have done something to redeem himself in Dumbledore’s eyes, and that he had saved Harry’s life in his first year even though he’d been a right arse the whole time.

Lily was staring at him hopefully.

*Christ.*

“I…I don’t know either, Lily. But,” he continued in a determined voice. “I think we’d better find out.”

“Then I’m in,” she responded just as firmly.

“No…no you’re not, Lily. You’re pregnant and he might be dangerous and—”

Her look would have given a basilisk a run for its money.

“And,” he continued before she could stop him, “more importantly, you care about him. Do you…do you really want to have to be part of this?”

She flinched, but her shoulders slumped in acceptance. “Please, Harry. Please don’t…don’t kill him or hurt him unless you absolutely have to.”

Ab grunted in Harry’s mind. *Leavin’ an enemy like that alive behind you s’a fine way to get yourself stabbed in the back.*

*But…*Harry responded slowly to himself…*but she’s my mum.*

“I won’t, Lily. Unless I have to. Now, can you tell me where I might find him?”

---

28 January, 1980

“Wait…wait…yes, he’s got all three! Branston pickle, fish fingers, and Marmite. It’s gotta be him,” Harry hissed at Gideon as he peered through his omnioculars into the run-down Tesco.

They had expected tracking down and kidnapping Severus Snape to be a relatively simple task. Lily knew he’d inherited his parents’ house in Cokeworth and, unless he was living at a Death Eater base, they figured he’d be easy enough to capture there.

But the sheer number of charms and protections on the natty little house on Spinner’s End had made it clear that an assault on the property would be folly, and the git always Apparated to and from the inside of the house.

Snape may have been a traitorous berk of a Death Eater, but even Harry could grudgingly admire his paranoia.

However, it seemed that Lily’s knowledge of her former friend had come through once again. According to her, Snape was a creature of habit, and generally subsisted on a diet founded upon three staple food products (which Harry desperately hoped he didn’t eat together).

So he and Gideon had spent an entire night three days prior breaking into every food shop in Cokeworth. Setting a mild alarm on each and every jar or box of Branston pickle, Marmite, and frozen fish fingers was beyond tedious, but the payoff was worth it. If a magical touched any one of the charmed foodstuffs, they’d know about it.
From their perch outside the Tesco, Harry and Gideon watched a portly little man with wheat blond hair and a bag full of said products exit the store, his long overcoat billowing elegantly around him as he strode over the icy sidewalk towards an alley.

Harry smile and raised his wand.

*Constant vigilance, you git.*

xoxoxox

To Harry’s great annoyance, his respect for Snape only grew when Gideon hit the man with a *Renervate*. Rather than jerking awake, he didn’t even move his eyes under his lids, but stayed in the same position.

Minute, almost imperceptible movements of the muscles in his wrists and ankles told Harry that Snape was exploring the tightness of the ropes that held him fast to a chair, and the twitch of his great nose had to be him identifying the distinctive smell of the Head’s stable.

Gideon rolled his eyes. “We know you’re awake, Snape.”

With agonizing calm, black eyes opened and regarded them dispassionately.

“We know you heard the prophecy at the Head,” Harry started bluntly. “We want to know exactly what you heard of it, and whom you told.”

Snape arched an eyebrow and said nothing.

Harry flicked his wrist and Ab’s knife shot into his hand. “You are going to tell us.”

A tiny uptick of the man’s lip, a flicker of light in his eyes were all that spoke to the young Death Eater’s amusement.

xoxoxox

*Dammit all, where’s Myrtle when you need her?*

After twenty minutes of unanswered questions and idle threats, Harry knew pulling the knife so early in the interrogation had been a mistake. He’d promised Lily not to hurt Snape unless he had to, and his word kept his hand indecisive.

*I can’t torture him when I don’t know that he’s really, truly bad!*

And for him to know anything, well, Snape would have to say something.

At this point, however, the man just looked bored.

*Who am I kidding? I couldn’t even torture Wormtail properly.*

“Harry,” Gideon muttered, “I don’t think we’re good at this.”

Snape snorted, the first sound he’d made since they’d revived him. “That’s an understatement, Prewett. You two imbeciles should recruit one of the little girls from the village to help.”

“I’m sorry we’re not up to your lofty standards!” Harry snapped.

“Or perhaps the Trolley Lady,” Snape mused. “I suspect her time hawking sweets to worthless brats
has produced a suitable taste for cruelty.”

Harry let out an irritated breath. “Oh yes, look at you, being so very brave. You’re forgetting I saw your face when you tucked tail and ran at your little raid on the werewolves.” He laughed dryly. “You’d have probably have wet your pants if you’d actually had to come face to face with one of them!”

Actually…

The memory of Lupin and Sirius telling him about Severus’ terror of werewolves sprang to the forefront of his mind.

I wonder if that happened here. If it did, he’s got to hate werewolves too.

“But you’re right,” he sighed heavily. “We’re rubbish torturers.” He stood up and walked to the door that led to the stairs. “C’mon, Gid. It’s only a few days until the full moon. We can just get Remus and Loch to spend it in here with him.”

Gideon blinked.

Snape managed to control his expression, but Harry could see the muscle in his cheek twitching. “You’re bluffing.”

Am I bluffing?

Harry shrugged. “We aren’t good at hurting people, but that doesn’t mean we don’t want you hurt. So, no.”

The other man’s already pale face lost a bit more colour. “So this is the vaunted Light side? You’d leave me to one of those Marauders?” He spat on the floor. “Of course you would, wouldn’t you? No one ever sees those bastards for the pompous, worthless little pricks they are! Even your ‘leader’ only sees them as paragons of shining Gryffindor goodness! Of course he’d think this acceptable!”

Gideon’s eyebrows raised, and Harry met his eye.

Whoa. Struck a nerve with that one. Okay then...

“Honestly, Snape, I couldn’t care less about who did what to whom during your schooldays.” The other man visibly flinched when a caustic edge crept into Harry’s laugh. “I don’t care about what happens to you now because of your actions in this war, not what happened between you and them in a fucking Transfiguration practical. Seriously, grow the fuck up.”

The man scoffed before returning his expression to the same blank stare he’d favoured for most of the afternoon.

Please let this work.

He could only think of one chip left to play that didn’t involve actual torture.

“And I especially don’t give two shits about what happens to someone who’s hell bent on getting his best friend murdered.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Aberforth.”

He’s telling the truth.

Push him.
“God,” Harry snapped, “I figured you were a worthless piece of shite, Snape, but I honestly I would have thought you still cared enough about Lily not to get her killed.” He turned and clasped his boyfriend’s shoulder. “C’mon, Gideon, we’re done here.”

“Wait.”

Again, to his irritation, his respect for the Slytherin rose. His command not only lacked an undertone of desperation, it was laced with the same sort of poise that only his Professor Snape could inject into a single word.

*When he’s not bitching about my father, that is.*

“Explain that. Now.”

Harry just shrugged, and smothered his smile at Snape’s annoyance with the gesture. “Well, so far as we can figure, the only person the prophecy could apply to is Lily’s kid. So yeah, you’re trying to have her murdered by your boss.”

“Lily’s not pregnant!” The mask of dispassion evaporated. *And apparently he heard enough of the prophecy to believe it’s about a baby.*

Gideon stepped forwards. “She is. She’s due at the end of July.”

“You know, Snape, when the seventh month dies? That, and she and James have each defied your Dark Lord three times.”

The man’s eyes were wide, the candlelight of the stable guttering and glinting in them, while the rest of his body stilled unnaturally.

“She wouldn’t let that Potter touch her like…” Snape hissed. “You…are lying.”

“No, Severus,” Gideon replied, almost gently. “We aren’t. And if He learns the prophecy, you know that he’ll hunt her down. It doesn’t matter if it’s about her kid or not, what matters is You-Know-Who will think it could be.”

The man’s glance flicked to Harry, and for a moment it felt like he was falling, drowning in the black pools of those eyes.

But then the moment passed as Snape uttered the barest of gasps.

It was a strange thing, Harry observed, to watch a man fall apart. Snape clamped his lips together as his chest started heaving uncontrollably, convulsing in the ropes that bound him to the chair. His chin dropped to his collarbone, unkempt hair shrouding his face, while his fingers dug into his thighs, his emotions—or his accidental magic—so strong that they rent the fabric of his robes.

Finally, a tremor ran through the man’s body, and then he stilled.

All dispassion was gone from the eyes that finally met Harry’s once again.

“You aren’t lying. And the Dark Lord will think her child a likely candidate for the prophesy.” Snape’s normally rich voice—really, Harry thought, the man’s best feature—sounded like a dead thing.

“Yes. He will.”

“I—I didn’t know she was pregnant. I didn’t even think it could refer to her…”
All of Harry’s pity evaporated. “No. You didn’t. And you didn’t even care that it had to refer to someone, some innocent person, some baby, that your master would target.”

Snape didn’t seem to hear him. “I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have told…I would never betray Lily—”

The roar of fury in Harry’s mind drowned out whatever else Snape said.

Gideon’s hands on his shoulders stopped him from attacking, but they didn’t stop his mouth. “You’ve betrayed her every day since the day you took that Mark on your arm! How many people have you killed, how many Mudbloods have you murdered, just because, what? The Marauders were oh so fucking mean to you?!”

“Harry!” His boyfriend chided. “This isn’t helping.”

Snape’s eyes burned with a toxic mixture of hatred and shame.

Harry took a deep, fortifying breath. “So. This tells me that you heard about as much of the prophecy as we did, and that you told someone.”

“I…” Snape ducked his head down. “I told Rodolphus.”

“Lestrange, Bellatrix’s husband,” Gideon added.

Snape nodded. “He—I was in the pub because he and his wife were furious with you for thwarting the attack on Morar and getting the majority of our forces imprisoned. McGonagall, the oaf, Potter, and Black,” he spat the names, “are too protected to target, but you both operate in public. They wanted information on your pub’s defences. When I heard that the Headmaster was coming…” The young Death Eater broke off, shaking his head. “He—Rodolphus—he will tell the Dark Lord about the prophecy. If he hasn’t already. The Dark Lord hasn’t been seen, so far as I know, for many months now…”

Shite, shite, fuck.

Snape’s head whipped up so suddenly that Harry cast a shield purely out of instinct.

“You,” the man said, his eyes boring into Harry’s face with frightening intensity, “you have to protect her. Hide her.”

Of course I’m going to do that, you shitstain!

“And her husband? Her unborn child?” He wasn’t sure why he was asking, but couldn’t stop himself.

Even as he sneered rebelliously, Snape’s shoulders slumped “Yes. Hide them. Hide them all.”

Harry blinked and stared at the breaking man. Push him more, Caffrey’s voice said in his head. “And what will you give me in return, Severus?”

Maybe it was his use of the man’s first name, but Severus recoiled. His eyes fluttered. “Anything,” he breathed.

Harry believed him.

Idly watching the man’s hands shaking in their bonds, he realised his way forward was clear.

There’s only one thing I want from Severus Snape.
“Do you think I missed anything?” Harry whispered to Gideon as the last traces of the magic that had bound his arm to Snape’s faded away.

Gideon cast a critical look at the man. “Probably,” he finally decided. “Only a dead man isn’t a danger at all. But I think it was enough.”

Harry let out a breath he hadn’t noticed he’d been holding.

He was still shocked that Snape had agreed to the Vow, only barely arguing about changing a bit of —admittedly problematic—wording.

*Maybe he really does care about her.*

It didn’t matter anymore, though. Soon enough, Snape would be gone from Britain, never again to even attempt to indirectly or directly contact Lily Potter without the express permission of Harry Aberforth. Never to willingly and knowingly associate with another Death Eater or Voldemort, and never to try to do any intentional harm to Gideon, Harry, or any of those who fought at Morar or their families.

“His teeth are pulled,” Gideon murmured as he watched Harry watching Snape.

Snape looked up, snorting softly. The man’s face was dangerously pale.

“You alright, Snape?” Harry asked. *If he dies after all that, I’m going to kill him.*

The laugh was laden with bitterness. “I am a ghost, Aberforth.”

“Dramatic,” Gideon observed mildly. “You have your whole life ahead of you. It’s just not the one you wanted, I suppose.”

Unbelievably, Snape only laughed harder. “Life!” he finally choked out. “What life? Your little vow has guaranteed my death! I cannot respond to the Dark Lord’s calls without breaking the Vow, and if he thinks I have deserted, it’s a simple enough matter to track me down through my Mark!”

Harry wasn’t sure if the curl of the man’s lips was mocking them or himself.

“Can you remove the Mark?” Gideon asked curiously.

“No,” Snape confirmed. “The magic is permanently bound to my flesh.”

*Huh.*

“Just your flesh?” Harry prodded.

Snape’s face crinkled in confusion. “It’s a rune-assisted transfiguration combined with alchemy. The Mark is not *on* my skin, it *is* my skin. So, yes, of—”

That was all Harry needed to hear. A slash of his wand and a muttered incantation interrupted the Death Eater’s explanation with a blazing arc. Harry’s Fire Whip shot across the room and neatly wrapped around the man’s bicep, its flames burning white-hot.

A moment later, and most of Snape’s arm lay on the floor, while the seething heat of the Fire Whip neatly cauterized the stump that was left.
“Harry!” Gideon chided. “You promised Lily you wouldn’t hurt him.”

Snape stared in wide-eyed horror at his severed arm.

“I promised I wouldn’t hurt him unless it was necessary,” Harry corrected his boyfriend, trying to keep his voice steady. I can’t believe I just did that. “That was necessary. It’ll keep him alive and Lily didn’t want him dead.”

“Hmm,” was his only response as Snape’s shocked eyes narrowed in fury.

“You—you cut off my arm!”

“Well, it needed to happen,” Harry shrugged.

“You cut off my arm!” The man sagged in his chair. “I—I’m a potioneer! How can I even begin to brew—”

“Oh, fuck you, Snape,” Harry snapped backed. “You’ll either figure out a way to make your precious potions with one arm, or you’ll have to do something else with your life. I’ve got a friend who was fighting to save people like Lily Potter and lost his arm to Death Eater shits. He got nothing out of it except being sacked from the Ministry. You get your life. So stop whinging and fucking deal with it.”

Snape gaped at him a moment before standing and stumbling from the stable.

“We don’t need to go after him right?”

Gideon shook his head. “No, the Vow should protect us. Let him go.”

Harry walked over and levitated the severed arm, his nose scrunched in distaste. “We should get burn this somewhere unconnected to the Head, just in case Riddle can track it.”

At that moment the door to the stairs opened and Guin bustled in. “Harry? Oh there you are! We were wonder—” Her voice cut off as she took in the scene. “Harry. Is that an arm?”

“Oh, yeah…” he cringed. “Sorry?”

“As if I don’t have enough…An arm? Really?” Guin closed her eyes. “Is this something I really need to know about?”

Harry felt a tinge of guilt. Rhys’ teething had kept the Dearborns up all night, and Guin looked wretched.

“Well, fine. I don’t think I want to know then,” she said. “Just… keep the body parts confined to the stable. I’m trying my best to keep this place clean!”

He and Gideon exchanged a glance. “Yeah, Guin…no body parts in the rest of the Head. Got it.”

“Good. Honestly, Harry,” she sighed, scrubbing her hand across her face. “Anyway, dismembered limbs aside, Loch has the bar all afternoon, and Doc and I wanted to see if you two wanted to come over and hang out?”

I think we may have gotten way too used to violence.

“Um, sure. But we need to get rid of this—"
She rolled her eyes as though to say of course you must dispose of the random body parts first. “Great! I was thinking a game of poker, perhaps? I’m low on coin, but I can play with pastries and treacle…”

Both men brightened.

xoxoxox

25 February, 1980

Professor Moira Pempredo was, she’d readily admit, a woman who believed in the value of routine.

Three weeks after a young Death Eater lost an arm in a stable, she woke at 6:07, as was her habit. She dressed herself in her customary plum teaching robes, whose cinched waist and crinoline underskirt were still only half a century out of date (entirely acceptable; everything old eventually becomes fashionable again). A cup of tea in her hand, she took her habitual spot at her antique divining table, shuffled her cards thirteen times, and laid out her spread for the day.

Indeed, for the adept routine highlighted those tiny details, the overlooked minutia of the Fates which could point to Truth.

Routine was also critical to all those who, like herself, engaged in one of the oldest professions in the world (not the oldest of course; Moira Pemphredo was a lady, after all). When asked, the Professor usually would claim to be part of the venerable brethren of Diviners, Seers, and Prophets.

But every so often she’d be overcome by a pique of honesty. On these rare occasions, she would confess that those with her skill set truly belonged to another profession, one often incorrectly viewed as distinct from Seers and their ilk.

Imbeciles, any who think such a thing, she’d smile to herself.

After more than a hundred and forty years on this earth, Moira Pemphredo knew precisely what she was.

She was a gambler.

All Diviners, Seers, and Prophets were, though the young ones were loathe to admit it.

They traded in probabilities, in likelihoods, all the while knowing that their words were usually little more than wind written on water. Every glimpsed sliver of the future was both a truth and a lie, always changing, adapting, mutating as one event bled into another and then another. Facts were a pipedream, a comfortable illusion for the uninitiated. The only sort of person who believed anything else were those poor simpletons, the ones who were four to a flush after the turn and trusted that the river could only bring success.

Such people tended to drown in that same river.

So, like any gambler worth her salt, the good Professor believed in the power of routine, all the while remembering that the Universe, as the king of gamblers, enjoyed a good bluff as much as anyone.

Gamblers never knew they had won until the game was over, and the chips were in their stacks.

As she sat at her little table and looked at her day’s completed spread, Moira Pemphredo’s thoughts turned to the other quality that distinguished a professional gambler from the imposters.
True gamblers knew when they were beat.

*And*, she added to herself, tapping the final card with a fuchsia-painted fingernail, *true ladies know how to bow out with style.*

With that she hobbled over to her cupboard and exchanged her customary robes for the lovely violet set she’d bought in Paris years before but had never worn. *Special occasion,* she’d winked at the salesgirl, not quite knowing then *why* she wanted them so.

Special occasion indeed.

Granted, the cards didn’t lay bare any of the details, didn’t spell anything out but a confluence of extraordinarily unlikely events ending quite decidedly, at least with regard to her person.

Of course, the Universe could be bluffing.

But Moira Pemphredo was a gambler, and she traded in probabilities.

xoxoxox

“That is...unnerving,” Gideon muttered as Colin the thestral and his mates tore into the meat that Harry had brought into the Forbidden Forest for them.

“Well, it’s winter and they’re hungry,” Harry shrugged. “And they’re excited to see me. Us.”

One of the foals nuzzled his hand for more, leaving bloody streaks across Harry’s sleeve.

“Whatever you say.” Gideon grimaced at the snow now sprinkled with red.

Rolling his eyes, Harry went to give Colin a final pat. “I should head to the castle. I promised Lily I’d stop in and see their new quarters before I meet with Albus. We still on for tonight?”

“Sure, we can—”

A strange screeching far in the distance interrupted him.

Harry frowned. “What is—”

Gideon was already on his feet, wand in hand. “The aggression alarm on our clock tower. It’s spiking.”

They whipped their heads in the direction of the village, and Harry saw blazing red sparks shooting high into the sky above the tree line.

A moment later, a delicate silver butterfly appeared.

“*Attack—Shop!*” it gasped in Fabian’s voice.

Colin the thestral looked up to see his friend vanish with a pop.

After a long pause, he resumed licking the spattered snow.

xoxoxox

Harry and Gideon Apparated onto High Street just around the corner from *Prodigious Clocks.* They had to duck immediately to avoid the spells shot at them by three members of the Hogsmeade militia.
“Shite, sorry mates!” one called before they all sprinted towards the clock shop.

Fabian was sprawled on the ground with a clearly-broken leg, while Rosmerta attempted to keep them shielded against three Death Eaters. A fourth was gazing blankly at the sky, surrounded by a growing puddle of blood.

Gideon flicked his wand quickly towards the three opponents, muttering, “Yes, Fabian is a sex god.”

Immediately three blurs streaked from the clock shop’s roof and barrelled into the ground near the Death Eaters’ feet. They disappeared in an explosion of earth and cobblestones. When the dust settled Harry could see those three were out of the fight.

Harry and Gideon rushed over to Fabian and Rosmerta while the militia bound the unconscious Death Eaters.

“‘Sorry—Fabian is a what?’” Harry asked dryly.

“Bastard set the password for the homing curses,” Gideon huffed.

Fabian seemed torn between gloating and grimacing over his broken leg. “Told you—oh fuck—they would work! Cast a targeting charm near where you want them to hit, and one password later you’ve got a nice big boom!” He hissed. “Oh Merlin, can you fix this, Harry?”

As Harry got to work on the broken bone, Fabian filled them in on what had happened. “Four of them came out of nowhere and the alarms went off right away. I got ol’ Rabastan over there, but his mate nailed me with a Bone-Breaker. Rosie here helped, and then you all showed up, Gid.”

“You think they were after us? Specifically?”

His brother just nodded, and Gideon closed his eyes.

“Okay,” Harry sat back on his heels. “It’s mended, but you shouldn’t put weight on it for a few days, and you should see Poppy in case I bollixed it up.”

“I’ve got him,” Gid huffed as he grabbed onto Fabian. A moment later they had Disapparated to the Hogwarts gates.

“Hey, Harry!” Rosmerta cried. “Is that smoke?”

He and the other militia members guarding the unconscious Death Eaters all turned and looked down Low Street.

No.

The curl of smoke quickly turned into a thick cloud, and a lick of flames flared in an upper window.

No, please, fuck no.

The Head was burning.

xoxoxox

Harry burst through the front door into a cloud of smoke that was too black and tasted of sulphur.

No, please.
Squinting his streaming eyes, he saw trails of black flames seeping down the walls from the upper floor. *Jesus, God, what is this—*

He vaguely heard Rosmerta cast a Flame Banishing Charm and shout out the door for help.

*There’s no one here—Loch must have gotten everyone out the back, please God—*

A wave of pure black flames, spitting and sizzling, was rolling past the upstairs landing through the sitting room.

*Oh God. Ariana.*

Every breath of the acrid smoke—*not natural, it’s all wrong, fuck what is this?*—made his mind feel as though it was slipping through his fingers.

He was drowning, melting into nothing—

*No, goddammit, not Ariana!* Harry forced himself out of the daze, wrenching his eyes open and throwing his hand out.

The incantation for the summoning charm came out only as a scream.

The edges of the canvas were smoking, but he managed to just catch the massive painting as it zoomed down from above. The blonde girl was frantically pacing in the foreground.

“Ariana! Geh-get out!” he coughed. “Tuh-tell Dumbledore we need help!”

She was gone by the time he got his breath enough to shrink the painting and put it into his pocket.

Screams of *Aguamenti* sounded from the street.

“Oh!” Rosmerta grabbed his arm. “This is five kinds of fucked! We have to get out now!”

“No!” *The Head, we have to save the Head—*

A creak from above was all the warning they had before the ceiling caved in, crashing into the bartop in a roar of flame and splintered wood.

“Goddammit Huh-Harry!” Rosmerta sputtered through the choking fumes. “We have *no bloody time!*”

*But Guin just replaced the bartop. It took her weeks to decide on the finish.*

What...what do I even try to save?

Someone was shouting at him again.

“Dammit, it’s going to reach the liquor soon! *Please* Harry!” Rosie was screaming in his ear.

A spark singed his hand, shocking him out of his stupor. As he turned, a flash of violet on the floor caught his eye.

*No.*

*Not again.*

He tore out of Rosmerta’s grasp and threw himself onto the ground behind one of the front tables.
“Fuck, there’re people in here,” he heard the barmaid gasp.

_Goddammit all._

Harry stared at the old woman shuddering on his floor.

_It’s divination gambling day. I forgot._

“Search for others, look behind the bar if you can,” Harry managed to choke out as he frantically put his fingers to Professor Pemphredo’s pulse.

The ancient woman’s eyes fluttered open. “Oh, there’s my Little Devil,” she smiled, blood on her teeth, her lips, her chin. “Late as always—or are you always early?”

“I’m getting you out—”

“Tosh,” she coughed. “Game’s over for me, boy. Th—that bloody hag Cassiopeia saw to that.” She smiled in the direction of the hall to the kitchen. “Shou—should have remembered the bitch is a Bluh-Black.”

Through the haze of smoke and flame, Harry caught sight of the crumpled body of Cassiopeia, one of the other divination regulars.

_What the hell do the Blacks have to do with this?_

He barely registered Rosmerta quickly Levitating Loch’s limp body out from behind the bar.

Suddenly Pemphredo’s hand clawed into his collar and pulled him close. “Know…know why the Fool is the first and last card in the Arcana?” she hissed, and he finally noticed the gaping wounds in her abdomen that was bleeding thick and fast.

“We don’t have time for—!”

“Because the Fool is _all the cards!”_ The old woman’s grip tightened insanely. “He’s all of them an—and more! Reh-Remember!”

There was _no time_ for this shit. One of the rafters came down, crashing through tables. “Come on,” he muttered, trying to gather the old woman in his arms. “We’re leav—”

Professor Pemphredo’s purple eyes stared into nothingness, her ancient body finally still.

And then the bar exploded in a column of fire dark as shadows.

_xoxoxox_

Harry choked and sputtered as he tried to fill his lungs with something other than smoke. Around him his goats streamed out of the stable door, bleating and running as far from the burning Head as they could.

The explosion had filled the pub with flames, making escape out the front impossible. Harry’d been forced to crawl down the back stairs towards the stable, where the goats had been in a full panic.

Despite his uncontrollable retching, he managed to turn on his knees in the back garden (where is he? it’s not clear at all. and i thought the stable was attached to the house) and watched with dumb horror as the plumes of smoke rose from his home.
This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening.

“—he alright?”

A tentative hand touched his shoulder. A moment later, a more familiar arm wrapped itself around his waist and hoisted him to his feet.

“—get you further away, Harry!”

Someone was half-carrying, half dragging him. His head lolled and he made out the face of his boyfriend through eyes that still streamed from the smoke. Another clumsy turn and he realised Sirius Black was on his other side, arm outstretched awkwardly.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, and then he was on his knees again, vomiting harshly into the wild grasses out beyond the bar.

“Probably needs a potion,” Sirius was mumbling. “Black fire can really fuck you up.”

He feebly batted away Gideon’s hands, which wouldn’t stop roaming over his body and left him feeling even dizzier. “‘M fine, stop, m’fine.” His mouth felt saturated in sour bile and acrid smoke. “They—they got Loch out, yeah?”

A woman’s voice answered from behind him. “Yeah, Harry, don’t worry. They’re taking care of him.”

Alice.

“The rest of the Order and the militia is trying to get the fire out,” Sirius added, his eyes looking anywhere but Harry’s. “But...”

“It’s not looking good, Harry,” Gideon finished in a soft voice.

Yeah. I can fucking see that.

“Harry,” Alice moved around and crouch down in front of him. “Revealing spells didn’t find any other human life in the building. But,” her expression softened just a bit, “there are three bodies.”

He was nodding, his mind desperately trying to get past the horror of the Head fucking burning to focus on the three people who’d apparently died there. “Yeah. It’s Pemphredo and the two other divination ladies. Uh, Chloe-something and Cassiopeia.” He narrowed his eyes at Sirius. “Cassiopeia Black, I guess.”

Sirius swore under his breath and kicked viciously at the ground.

“Well, at least Guin and Doc were off today,” Gideon said bracingly.

His head just kept nodding. “Yeah. Guess we should have been expecting this after they sent Sn—the spy last month.” Another fit of coughing overtook him, his eyes still streaming and stomach heaving.

“They’re just getting whoever them can that was at Morar, I think,” Gideon said. “Both the Head and the shop are pretty obvious targets.”

Something about Gideon’s words pierced into Harry’s brain like a needle. He fought to pinpoint what was so damn wrong with it even as black flames burst through the roof of the building.
The Head’s burning, it’s burning, screamed through his mind on a loop.

And then it felt like a whirlwind of ice froze his entire being solid as a single thought cut across his mind.

Guin was at Morar too.

The others were talking, still talking, but Harry was groping his way to his feet, and then running clumsily far out behind the Head, his lungs tearing and his stomach retching.

Shouts followed him, but he ran on.

“Dammit, Harry!” Gideon cried as he closed the distance between them. “Dammit, what?”

“Don’t you get it?” Harry tried to scream, his voice coming out raw. “You said it! ‘At least Guin and Doc are off today!’ Don’t you see? Guin was at Morar! What if we’re not the only ones getting attacked?”

Gideon shook his head furiously, sputtering something about the Death Eaters probably Apparating out, but Harry was on his feet again.

As Alice and Sirius sped towards them, a loud boom followed by a series of cracks like lightning sounded through the countryside.

“That—” Gideon said in quiet horror, “That’s coming from the Dearborns’ house…”

It’s protected, we put up every protection we could think of but the Fidelius, it’s protected, no wizard could get through them this fast, it’s protected Harry chanted to himself.

The four fighters raced towards the cottage.

They rounded the clearing and Harry almost sobbed with relief. A bright blue dome of shields enclosed the entire cottage and the area immediately around it, though two witches and a wizard were doing their damnedest to bring it down.

There was a long shock of dark curls. Bellatrix.

Next to him, Sirius stiffened. “Cuh—could one of you take my mother, please?” he asked in a deceptively calm voice. “I’ll…I’ll take Rodolphus. Please.”

Mother? Harry’s jaw dropped as he stared at the other, much older witch, whose face was alight with a maniacal grin as she rained down lightning bolts on the shields.

Nonetheless, the spells seemed to be holding, and he felt his terror unwind as his eyes surveyed the —

There was a wand in his hand and a spell on his lips before his mind understood what it was seeing by the cottage’s front porch.

Inside the protections.

“You three take whichever ones you want,” he heard his voice saying. “I’ll take the Dementors.”

Flashes of light, crackles of spells, Alice hissing spells she probably shouldn’t have known.

A woman screaming about blood-traitors, a spray of blood arcing through the air.
The rest of the world existed in vague colors and sounds as his legs pumped him across the meadow and through the cottage’s shields, twin albatrosses ahead of him setting the three Dementors hovering near the front steps to flight.

The battle raged behind him, but Harry’s gaze was locked on the person splayed on the front path of the Dearborn House.

The man’s chest slowly rose with tiny breaths, and a wand was still clutched in his hand. Wide, empty eyes regarded the sky.

—he’s okay, Doc’s okay, he’s okay, Doc’s okay, he’s okay—

The Dementors were gone but Harry could have sworn he felt their chill in his bones.

—empty, empty, empty—

He closed his eyes in relief as he found Doc’s pulse, but his mind kept shouting that something was terribly wrong. It felt like just a moment. Behind him, he realised the sounds of the battle had stopped.

“Oh my God,” Alice gasped from just outside the intact shields, “Oh God, he’s been Kissed, oh God.”

No he hasn’t, he’s fine, he’s fine—

Another woman laughed. “Fools! No charm or enchantment can stop Dementors! That’s what you get for—” Her voice died with the sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Gideon was by his side, saying something, but what felt like an electric shock suddenly charged through Harry’s blood.

Oh God, please no.

He burst through the front door and cast another patronus at the two Dementors in the Dearborns’ living room, sending them fleeing.

Not a whisper of thought broke through the silence as he stared down at blank blue eyes. A tear had streaked down Guin’s pale face, and Harry could only watch as it finally fell from her chin.

A hand grabbed Harry’s own, but he shrugged it off.

—empty, empty, empty—

Another thought hit him like an ice pick to the brain.

Then he was running, racing through the cottage at full speed, upstairs, downstairs, everywhere, the same spell being ripped from his throat over and over again.

“Hominem Revelio! Hominem Revelio! Hominem Revelio!”

And then Gideon was there in the Dearborns’ kitchen, his hands on Harry’s shoulders. “Harry, please! What the hell are y—?”

“Rhys!” he shrieked back, raising his wand to cast again—in his mind a voice that dripped with dread and doubt whispered there isn’t any point. “Where is he? Dammit, Gideon! Where’s the fucking baby?”
Next on The Second String: I can’t think of a way to preview chapter 39--or even give its title--without giving too much away. One spoiler: no babies die in this story.

On Neville: Given the speculation in the comments, I thought I should add that I envisioned Alice never getting pregnant in this universe (i.e., losing Frank did not cause miscarriage). As for Draco, it’s hinted at with Lucius’ betrayal of Voldemort, but yes, Narcissa is pregnant.

My beta AverageFish is the loveliest beta in the world and also writes very well. They have two fics here on ao3 now. Check out the twilight parody and this wholesome Severitus or head over to their account on fanfiction.net.
XXXIX. London Bridge Is Falling Down

26 February, 1980

They never seemed to stop talking.

Harry’s hands moved to accept another cup of tea from McGonagall, who’d apparently appointed herself his comforter.

She was rubbish at, it of course. Her spoken attempts had been clumsy things that fizzled into awkwardness. Thankfully, she now seemed resigned to the idea that more tea was the most effective course of action.

*I don’t want to be comforted.*

*I want someone to tell me who I have to kill to get Rhys back.*

Through the window behind Fawkes’ perch, the sky was brightening from pink to orange.

The temptation to let emptiness wrap itself around him whispered in his ear.

*No, dammit! They may say something important.*

He forced himself to pay attention once again, as he had done for the last several hours.

The night had stretched out in an unending circuit of Auror interviews and apologetic uselessness from the Order, but through it all he had made himself stay in Dumbledore’s office and listen. Much of it had been ridiculous faffing about, but a few moments of actual value had punctuated the pointlessness.

It had been around midnight that Mad-Eye Moody and Edgar Bones had returned from interrogating the two surviving attackers. The other Lestrange brother had been killed by Sirius, but Gideon had managed to subdue the woman Sirius had identified as his mother. Alice had captured Bellatrix, nearly eviscerating the bitch in the process.

Mad-Eye had reported grimly that Veritaserum hadn’t even been needed except for confirmation. Walburga Black had been more than keen to talk, and Bellatrix hadn’t seemed able to stop herself.

“They got it into their heads that young Aberforth here was the one who did in little Regulus Black last year,” Moody explained, his magical eye fixed on Harry.

Next to him, Sirius shifted uneasily.

“Apparently, they thought that since the Ministry Invasion. But Bellatrix Lestrange confirmed that Voldemort had ordered them to leave Aberforth alone—I’m guessing he wanted to deal with you himself, kid. And Lestrange knows you were at Morar,” the old Auror continued. “Most of the others are behind strong wards, but you and the Prewetts and the Dearborns…” He let them finish the thought. “Anyway, they begged for your heads, but the Dark Lord didn’t let ‘em at you until he
found out that some prophecy had been made at the Hog’s Head.”

The implied question hung in the air.

Harry stilled.

The assembled Order members looked at him with frowns and arched eyebrows.

Albus met Moody’s gaze, giving only the slightest shake of his head. “Thank you, Alastor. Go on.”

Moody narrowed his eyes but let the dismissal pass without comment. “Not much else to tell. Cassiopeia Black regularly met with friends at the pub, so she served as look-out for the others. Was supposed to signal when either Aberforth or the Dearborns were inside, but it looks like the team assigned to the Prewetts got too excited and fired off early when they saw Fabian. Cassiopeia Black threw curses at everyone in the pub—hurt the werewolf and killed her own companions, though it looks like Pemphredo did Black in before dying.”

Harry almost smiled.

“Lestrange, his wife, and Walburga Black were stationed behind the pub with the Dementors. Bellatrix Lestrange set the fire and then they headed to the Dearborn house. The protections on the house kept ‘em out, but of course the Dementors...”

He didn’t need to finish. The Dearborns’ fates reminded them all that Dementors could get through just about any protective charm or enchantment.

“And the boy?” Sirius asked, refusing to quail under Moody’s suspicious glare. “Who took the boy? And why?”

Moody leaned in, a mean little smile playing across his face.

“None of them knew about the baby or what happened to it. Confirmed under Veritaserum. Though maybe we should be asking you that, Black. You got to the scene of the crime awful quick, didn’t you?”

The discussion degenerated into Moody barking his doubts about Sirius’ loyalties—a refrain many had apparently heard before—and Sirius snarling back.

Harry didn’t hear the rest of the argument, their furious words drowned out by his own roaring thoughts.

This is all my fault.

They came because of me.

Gideon seemed to read his mind. “Don’t you dare go blaming yourself,” he murmured. “They came for all of us, because of Morar, because of Snape. This isn’t just about Regulus Black.”

Then as the night had worn on, all anyone had been able to talk about was the alarming behavior of the Dementors. This had been the first time, so far as any of them had known, that the creatures had actually fought with Voldemort’s forces.

Around four in the morning, an exhausted Alice had reported that Minister Crouch had confirmed a small number of Dementors seemed to be missing from Azkaban. However, there’d been no discernible change in the rest of the Dementors’ behavior.
Debate had raged over whether or not Azkaban should be closed, though Harry thought Lily had the right of it when she’d asked if anyone actually knew how to do that. With the Ministry’s forces still severely depleted because of the Invasion, they hardly had the manpower to take on both Voldemort and an army of displaced Dementors, not to mention rehouse the prisoners of Azkaban.

Harry hadn’t been able to really care at that point.

Every moment spent talking about the status of the prison was a moment not talking about Rhys Dearborn.

And now the sun was rising, and he was no closer to finding his godson.

_I can kill a person a dozen ways, but I have no idea how to find a baby._

Helplessness wrapped around his throat, his wrists, trapping him in an office where nothing was getting done.

A heavy hand rested itself on his shoulder. He looked up to find Hagrid, beetle-black eyes moist and solemn, sitting next to him in what had been Sirius’ chair.

Harry looked away, a lump lodged in his throat.

Moody and Sirius were having it out again, standing in the middle of the office with their wands at each other’s chests.

“Fine! Go ahead and search my flat, search whatever you want, you bastard!” Sirius screamed. “Give me Veritaserum, for fuck’s sake! I’m not like them!”

“He’s not, you know,” Harry murmured quietly to Hagrid.

The half-giant nodded sadly. “This ain’t helpin’ any. Now we’re jus’ turnin’ on ourselves.”

Closing his eyes, Harry let their argument wash over him.

_The Blacks didn’t take Rhys. No one could get into the house without already being allowed through the protections. The Dementors could get in, but I can’t see them kidnapping a six-month-old._

Someone shot off a hex, but Harry ignored the scuffle, the Order’s raised voices, the resounding crack as Dumbledore shocked them all into silence.

Instead he stared unseeing out the window, vaguely grateful for the continued weight of Hagrid’s hand on his shoulder and Gideon’s leg pressed against his own.

_Where could Rhys be?_

Gradually he realised that a line of figures was blocking his view of the sunrise, their profiles cut black against the sky.

Fawkes chirped so quietly Harry might have imagined it.

_What are—_

He blinked.

_Ravens. They’re ravens._ Seven black birds stood silently on the ledge of Albus’ window.
The sight tugged at Harry’s memory until his mind snagged on an almost forgotten winter’s day.

My first year here. The day of the pub’s inspection. Ab didn’t want me around, so he sent me to Wig Palter’s place. I watched some telly and there were…there were…

There were ravens in his window.

Everything suddenly became too sharp, too clear.

He stood so fast that all conversation in Dumbledore’s office broke off. Eyes were on him, too many eyes.

“Sorry…I have to go. Now.”

Albus and Lily were both saying something, and Moody started to rant about “operational security,” but Harry was already out the door. He flung himself down the spiral staircase, out into the hallway and—

—straight into a straw-haired young man, sending him crashing to the floor.

“Hey—hey you! You can’t—I’m the Head Boy!” he sputtered.

Harry ignored the kid and ran on.

How did I not think of this?

Heavy tread followed him through the corridors, down the staircases, and out the front doors.

He was nearly off the grounds when a hand grabbed his shirt and spun him around.

“—the hell, Harry?”

“Wig!”

Gideon and Hagrid stared at him.

“What do you m—?” his boyfriend started.

“Wigol Palter! It was divination gambling day yesterday!” Harry couldn’t push the words out fast enough. “Don’t you see? All the ladies were there, but where the hell was Wig? He never misses a day!”

Gideon frowned. “Wait, are you saying that Wig took the bab—”

“Whoever took Rhys had to be able to get through the protections on the Dearborn’s cottage!” Harry snapped. “They barely let anyone in, but Guin gave the regulars that tour on Christmas—so Wig had access!”

“But I don’ see why ol’ Wig would take the tyke—” Hagrid began.

“I don’t care why!” Harry called over his shoulder as he made for the boundary of Hogwarts again. “But I’ll find out!”

Gideon and Hagrid looked at each other. “All right,” Gideon said. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t need you to—”
“None a’ that runnin’ off on yer lonesome, now,” Hagrid snapped, bringing Harry up short. “Yer gettin’ too old ter be so daft. We’re coming and tha’s final.”

“Exactly.” Gideon smiled. “So, where are we going?”

_Fine! Whatever!_ Harry threw up his hands. “London. We’re going to London.”

Grabbing Gideon’s arm first, Harry tried very hard to forget what Ab had said back when he was first teaching him to Apparate.

“**Now, the most important thing is to focus on where you’re goin’. If you don’t have a clear picture in your mind, you’ll leave bits and pieces of yourself all over England.**”

It had been more than three years since Harry’d been to Wig’s odd…house under the Thames. He closed his eyes and crossed his fingers.

An uncomfortable few seconds later, the two were standing in a large, dirty corridor that seemed to be underground. A yellow sign on the wall warned him of _High Vantage_, while another informed that this was _Old London Bridge_.

Harry let out an explosive breath as he checked to make sure he and his boyfriend were both intact. “I’ll be damned, it worked…”

Gideon shot him a questioning look.

“You _guessed_?” Gideon yelped, but Harry was already Apparating back to get Hagrid.

Moments later, Harry was leading them uncertainly through the labyrinth of corridors he only vaguely remembered, until they finally stumbled upon the circular purple door that led into Wig’s home.

It was locked. And absolutely _covered_ in enchantments.

Harry growled in frustration and started firing every spell he could think. Unlocking charms turned to blasting hexes turned to Red Nora’s fireball curse.

The cheerful purple paint didn’t even chip.

“Calm yerself, Harry!” Hagrid shouted as one of his fireballs rebounded off the door and shot back at them.

Gideon just grabbed Harry’s wand from his hand.

“I think we need a password,” he observed mildly.

“Oh, you think?” Harry muttered, mired in an uncomfortable mixture of fury and embarrassment. “Or maybe,” sarcasm dripped from every word as he approached the door, “we just need to knock.” He punched the wood in frustration.

It immediately creaked open.
Hagrid snorted and Gideon put a hand over his mouth.

“Seriously—oh, that’s—that’s just irritating!” Harry grumbled. Ignoring Gideon’s muffled laughter, he motioned for the man to give him back his wand.

Looking past the door, the men sobered.

“Be ready,” Harry said quietly over his shoulder and led them through.

xoxoxox

Everything seemed…fine.

The massive room was still overflowing with books and newspapers. Shelves full of glowing glass orbs stretched down one wall. The only sound was their own breathing.

“Merlin,” Gideon whispered, his eyes glued to the ceiling.

Harry followed his gaze and frowned. The other time he’d been here he hadn’t noticed the massive, upside-down sundial that dominated the ceiling. Painted around its edge was the phrase *Time and tide stay for no man.*

“Harry, the sign outside, it said ‘Old London Bridge,’ right?”

At his nod, Gideon whistled and Hagrid’s eyes widened.

“Oh hell, this has to be part of the Nonsuch House then.”

“The what?” Harry snapped.

*We’re here to find Rhys, come on!*

Hagrid shook his head. “The Nonsuch House, Harry. The Ministry from the ol’ days.”

“When the Ministry was founded in seventeen hundred and something, their first location was the former Wizard’s Council building on the Old London Bridge,” Gideon explained, “in a building called Nonsuch. But it was too public, and the Muggles tore down the bridge a few decades later anyway, so the new Ministry was built.”

*Yeah. Yeah, I remember Pel teaching me something about that for the OWLs, but why the hell—*

“Aye, an’ they separated the Nonsuch House into pieces,” Hagrid added. “Heard that they moved the second floor to Bristol fer the Aurors to use in trainin’ exercises and that the third floor—”

“Well, *thanks* for the history lesson, guys, but—”

“Dammit, Harry, think!” Gideon interrupted sharply. “This is a *Ministry* building!”

Harry froze.

*No. No way.*

“Are you—are you saying that Wig—*Wigol Palter*—works for the Ministry?”

“Not just that,” his boyfriend said grimly, his eyes on the wall teeming with glass orbs. “Based on those prophecy orbs, I’m saying that Wigol Palter works for the Unspeakables.”
Their eyes met, and Harry knew that Gideon was feeling the same heavy weight that was settling in his own stomach.

“Pro-prophecy orbs?”

Gideon shrugged. “Divination OWL—oh, don’t give me that look, Professor Pemphredo is…was pretty decent. Anyway, true prophecies are preserved by the Unspeakables in balls like, well, like those.”

Harry’s mind raced through snatches of memories. Wig showing up at the ‘Sticks when Harry revealed he wasn’t a squib. Wig’s sad eyes and strange silence the night of the Ministry Invasion. Wig watching—always just watching—when they planned the defence of Loch Morar, when Trelawney and Snape came to the Head…

Wig’s not just good at divination, he’s a sodding Unspeakable.

And he’s been around the whole time.

Oh fuck.

He might know. He might know about me…

Hands shaking and stomach churning, Harry closed his eyes, willing himself to calm down.

But he’s always been so, well, so Wig. If he knows, maybe…maybe he hasn’t told, maybe—

He forced himself to think of his godson instead.

And it doesn’t matter now. Rhys matters now. I’ll worry about Unspeakables and prophecies when he’s safe.

“Okay, well, whatever. If this is a Ministry building we should probably just be as quick as we can.”

Gideon nodded. “Let’s spread out.”

Harry paused for a moment, remembering Myrtle’s standing orders to always work in a team—

—but the place seemed empty, and they needed to find Rhys right bloody now.

He nodded.

Hagrid seemed to understand that there was more going on than he knew, but he just shrugged and made for the part of the great cavern that Harry remembered housed the kitchen.

While Gideon veered right towards the glass-orb section where Wig kept his desk, Harry walked past the couch and television towards the parts of the huge room he hadn’t seen on his first visit.

Shelves brimming with star-charts, plastic binders, and rubber ducks created a nook for a free-standing toilet and bath.

He passed another portioned off “room” filled with drawings of animals—fish, squid, horses, stags, and others—all done in a riot of colour.

Harry shook his head.

The shelves that formed hallways forced him to round a bend into what had to be the bedroom.
“Wig!”

Across from the simple double bed was a side table and chair. Harry stared dumbly for a moment before realizing what he was looking at.

“Guys, I found him! Wig’s…he’s dead!”

There wasn’t a mark on the body, not a trace of blood, though a streak of soot ran down the man’s cheek. Next to him sat a pot of ink and quill, a wand on the floor by his feet as though he’d just dropped it.

There was a piece of parchment in the man’s hands.

Harry snatched it only to find that it was blank.

“Goddammit, Wig!” His frustration felt like a living, biting thing.

**Hello Harry.**

Neat, exacting script appeared on the parchment in an eerie parody of Tom Riddle’s diary.

“The fuck?”

More writing appeared.

**By the time you read this, the Dearborns will be lost and I will be dead. I am sorry that I could see no path to another, better future.**

Hagrid and Gideon rushed in.

“Wig’s…he’s dead, but this,” Harry held out the parchment for Gideon, “—it’s him, I think.”

The other two men peered at it.

“Er—Harry, it’s blank,” Hagrid muttered almost as an apology.

Harry looked back down. Black ink on cream parchment stared back at him.

**Am I going mad?**

Gideon started casting a number of detection charms Harry didn’t recognize on the page.

“No, Hagrid, I don’t think it is,” he frowned. “There are charms all over it. I think it’s spelled so that only a particular person can read it, and it looks like there’s some sort of time-delay charm that makes certain parts visible in a certain order.”

**Please tell Mr. Prewett that I have always admired his clocks.**

Harry stuttered out the newest message. **How the hell did he know Gid would be here?**

_I could not save the Dearborns, though theirs is not the worst fate it could have been. But I could save their child. Granted, taking such direct action contradicts certain limitations placed upon me, but I am an old man who has spent most of his life being useless._

_I should like to be useful for once._
Harry’s finger traced over the last sentence.

The next words that appeared seemed to bleed more deeply into the page, their ink blacker, thicker.

**Rhys Dearborn can be found in the sort of place that Harry Potter remembers as his first home.**

It felt like a strange dream to see his name, his old name, written out. He’d almost forgotten the shape of it.

*He knew. Wig knew.*

“This is…what the hell is this?”

Next to him, Gideon frowned more deeply. “Yeah, there’s something more cast here…a lot more. What does it say?”

“Er…it says that—” he managed before choking, his tongue seeming to curl in on itself.

Gideon’s eyebrows shot up but didn’t reply, instead flicking more whispers of spells at the parchment. “Okay, yeah. I think, I mean I’ve not seen one before, but I think this is giving you information that’s under a *Fidelius* charm. You can’t say it, since you aren’t the secret keeper.”

*What the hell?*

Wig’s note remained silent.

*Okay. Think then. What’s the first place Harry Potter would remember as his home?*

*It’s gotta be Hogwarts, but Albus surely would know if Rhys were there...*

Mind far away, he wandered back out into the main area of the cavernous room. His eyes trailed unseeing over bookshelves and couches, prophecy orbs and ravens’ nests. Looking back towards the front entrance, they landed on a strange little stairway built into the wall that led up to empty air.

*Oh.*

“Hey—hey did either of you notice that staircase before?”

He felt Hagrid and Gideon share a glance behind him.

“What staircase, Harry?”

*Oh for fuck’s sake.*

Hope bubbled in his chest as he raced down the meandering path through stacks of newspapers to the staircase only he could see.

There was a tiny doorknob set into the wall below it.

*Yes!*

He wrenched the little door open and peered into the cupboard under Wig’s stairs.

Rhys was sleeping soundly, wrapped in a bundle of blankets.

“Oh God. Oh, thank *God.*” His heart felt like it was beating through his throat as he grabbed the baby and hugged him to his chest.
“I’ll be damned…” Gideon muttered, hurrying to him. “Where was he?”

“In the—” Harry tried to say “cupboard,” but the words choked themselves in his throat. “Can’t you see it? Right there.”

“What?” Hagrid asked sharply.

Gideon stared at the wall. “I don’t see anything…Oh bloody—Wig must have it under a Fidelius. And he gave you the secret. Oh, that’s brilliant, that is.”

Harry couldn’t care less how brilliant it was. He was too busy fumbling with his wand to run every single diagnostic spell he knew on his godson.

Hagrid took Rhys for him. Several charms later Harry sighed, running his hands up and down the sleeping child’s arms. “He’s fine. He’s really fine. Just a light sleeping spell.”

As Hagrid cooed over the boy and Gideon continued exploring the wall for a door he couldn’t see, Harry glanced back at Wig’s note.

I am truly sorry for scaring you, Harry, but I had to protect the Dearborn child. In some possible futures Voldemort tracks a prophecy to me before your arrival here.

Reading the message out loud, Harry blinked at the underlined words. A prophecy that Voldemort’s interested in?

Prophecy...here....

Oh, no bloody way.

He ducked his head inside the cupboard. Something small and round was wrapped tightly in cloth.

Hagrid’s attention was on the baby, so Harry reached in quickly and pocketed the covered globe.

Gideon’s eyes went wide. “We should go.”

More ink on parchment.

Please give my thanks to Peloother. Tell him I have never forgotten.

Good luck, Harry.

And yes, you really should go now.

“Why?” he asked the parchment.

There was a pause.

Harry’s eyebrows shot up as he read the response aloud.

I find myself quite resentful regarding my treatment by my employers. Now that you have retrieved the child, I should like to finally recompense them properly.

“Oh, what a very oddity-odd thing ter say, yes it is,” Hagrid muttered in baby talk to a still-sleeping Rhys. “What’s it mean, y’reckon?”

A single word appeared on the page:
The three men stared at each other.

“I vote we go now,” Gideon muttered dryly as Hagrid handed the baby back to Harry.

They took the maze of hallways at a sprint. Gideon had just grabbed Hagrid’s arm to Apparate them both away when a massive explosion rocked the cavern and sent them all to their knees.

“Boom’s right,” Hagrid coughed.

Rhys opened his eyes and gurgled.

xoxoxox

Three men and a baby entered Dumbledore’s office only to run into a handful of Unspeakables.

It was a good job that Harry was holding Rhys. Handling a squalling child—Rhys was most unenthused about Apparation and had fussed the whole way up to the seventh floor—forced him to keep his flaring panic in check.

“Oh, you’ve found the boy! Excellent,” Albus beamed, completely unconcerned about the scowling figures draped in blue next to him. “He was with Mr. Palter then?”

They already know about Wig. Shite.

Next to him, Mad-Eye looked ready to boil over. Alice was stone-faced.

“Er, tha’s right, Headmaster,” Hagrid said. “Though poor ol’ Wig’s dead.”

Oh God, we’ll never be able to lie with Hagrid here.

“Stop!” one of the Unspeakables barked. “You—shut up for now. You three, out!”

Mad-Eye and Alice bristled while Albus raised an unimpressed brow.

Rhys continued wailing.

“There was a bloody explosion in the middle of the Thames! It’s under the jurisdiction of the DMLE, you little blue shits!” Moody spat.

“And it was property of the Department of Mysteries!” another Unspeakable fired back. “If we need half of an Auror to help arse up our investigation, we’ll let you know.”

Dumbledore prudently cast a shield between the two groups.

“I do believe this is my office, ladies and gentlemen. While I will ask Aurors Moody and Longbottom to leave,” he raised a hand to forestall the inevitable explosion, “I remind the rest of you that the DoM does not, in fact, outrank the Chief Warlock.” He sat back in his chair comfortably and munched on a biscuit. “I’ll remain here for your discussion.”

“Fine,” the person who seemed to be in charge of the Unspeakables growled. “Number 18, take the baby to headquarters. Regular scans.”

“The fuck?” Harry shouted. “If you think I’m going to just let you take my godson—”
One of the Unspeakables was somehow now holding a squalling Rhys.

Harry felt like he’d been hit by a live wire. “Give him back now or there will be corpses in this office.”

“Ah, it wouldn’t do to have the Department of Mysteries kidnapping infants after they’ve already been kidnapped. Especially not without allowing the child to visit his regular Healer. What would the papers say?” Dumbledore’s smile was all edges. “I’m certain our Aurors will be happy to escort the child to Madame Pomfrey.”

The lead Unspeakable paused, his eyes flashing between Harry and Albus, but finally nodded to his subordinate. Harry startled when Moody stepped in front of Alice and cradled Rhys to his chest.

“Um, Moody? Want me to take him for you?” Alice asked.

“I’ve been holding babies since before your parents could wipe their own arses, Longbottom. Shut it.” Mad-Eye smiled down at Rhys and made his magical eye spin. The baby stopped crying and stared, entranced. “Ah, there’s a good tyke.”

They Aurors left the office to the sound of Moody telling the tale of how he’d lost his eye in a disturbingly gentle voice.

Moments later, Harry, Gideon, and Hagrid found themselves bound and seated in straight-backed chairs.

The lead Unspeakable ignored their protests and turned to Harry with a small bottle in his hands.

“This is Veritaserum. You are going to take it.”

Sudden panic stole Harry’s breath.

_Fuck, gotta get out of here—_

“The hell I am! I have rights and—” Harry was interrupted by the man unceremoniously grabbing him by the back of his hair and forcing drops of the potion into his mouth. Next to him Gideon was fighting his bonds and shouting something.

_Oh God, oh fuck—_

He vaguely heard Albus saying something but his mind was already disintegrating, crumbling to dust that slipped through is fingers.

_Please, no, I can’t—_

He didn’t have a mind to think, time to _plan_, before the bastard was asking him questions.

“What is your full, legal name?”

_Oh God oh fuck—_

xoxoxox

Not half an hour later, Harry manhandled Gideon into a broom closet on the way to the Hospital Wing and did his best to snog the life out of him.

Eventually, when breathing became a concern, they broke apart.
“I—cannot—believe—” Harry panted.

Gideon scrubbed his face with his hand. “Thank God you changed your name. And bloody hell, I didn’t know Wig was brilliant.”

Harry nodded dumbly and let his head fall against the other man’s chest, the drop in adrenaline leaving him feeling rather like an overcooked noodle.

“Legal,” he drawled. “Christ, I love that word. If he’d just asked me my name, I don’t know what I would have said. But Harry Aberforth is my legal name, in this universe, at least. And yeah, Wig…”

Wig was a goddamn genius.

It had been impossible to struggle against the potion, but in the end Harry hadn’t even needed to. Every question the Unspeakables had asked he could answer honestly without giving away any of his past or any illegal actions.

His deduction that Wig had taken Rhys made sense. He didn’t realize the Nonsuch House was restricted property until he was already inside today—he’d been babysat there when he was younger! Yes, a note had been charmed so that only he could read it. Yes, it said things about the future—that Wig and the Dearborns would die, that Wig thought he could save Rhys, that Voldemort might attack, and the less-than-cryptic ‘Boom.’

But all that future knowledge was now in the past.

Yes, it mentioned a prophecy, but it didn’t say which, one or even if Wig had it.

And the one, single thing that could cause Harry real problems—Wig’s use of Harry Potter as the clue to find Rhys—had been part of a secret protected by a goddamn Fidelius Charm, for which Harry wasn’t the secret keeper!

The Unspeakables had gotten pretty tetchy when he literally couldn’t say anything to their questions about that part of the note, but it wasn’t like they could actually do anything about it.

Harry had felt their disgusted frustration as he and Gid escaped Dumbledore’s office.

Oh poor them.

Bloody well-played, Wig.

The man’s death would hurt later, he knew. Harry couldn’t even think about Guin and Doc or the burned-out Head.

But his godson was waiting for him and his boyfriend was smiling at him, and that was something, at least.

xoxoxox

Harry was leaving the Hospital wing with Gideon and a grumpy Rhys when Lily’s fox patronus skittered up and demanded their presence in her rooms, her nervous voice an octave too high.

Entering the Potters’ quarters some minutes later, Harry was struck by the odd sight of Pel and Lily sitting side-by-side, both intent on the stacks of parchments that were spread over a table.

“Oh thank God, you’re okay,” the young woman burst out when she caught sight of them. “And Rhys, he’s fine,” she went on breathlessly. “He is fine, right?”
“Yeah, he slept through every—”

“Sign this,” Pel interrupted, shoving a parchment into Harry’s hands.

“Er—”

“Hurry up!” the old solicitor snapped. “Now, Harry!”

Harry grabbed a quill and scrawled his name.

“Wait,” he said as he handed it back. “What did I just sign?”

Everyone else in the room sighed.

Pel gave him a long-suffering look. “You just put me on retainer. Now if those bastard Unspeakables want to question you, they have to go through me!”

“Chatter in the castle was that some are here looking for you,” Lily added. “We’ve started figuring out defense strategies already. First, if they know that you—”


Lily just blinked, but Pel looked as though he’d been kicked in the stomach. “He what?”

“They asked the wrong questions is all,” Harry shrugged, sinking into a chair and letting Rhys cuddle up to his chest. “But I think everything is fine now, with them at least.”

“Tell me everything,” Pel demanded.

xoxoxox

When he and Gideon finished, Lily’s face was pale and Pel made no attempt to hide the tears streaming down his cheeks.

“So…you got the prophecy then?” his mother’s counterpart finally asked.

Harry reached into his robes, having nearly forgotten the tightly-wrapped sphere. “Guess so.”

Taking a deep breath, he removed the fabric from around the ball.

He noticed a tag magically affixed to the smooth glass orb—

\[ S.P.T. \text{ to } A.P.W.B.D. \]
\[ \text{Dark Lord and Harry Potter.} \]

His fingers brushed over the old familiar letters, but Trelawney’s raspy voice was already filling the room with what seemed to be the full prophecy.

With a shuddering breath the woman’s voice finally quieted. Harry helplessly flicked his eyes between his friend, his boyfriend, and his mother’s counterpart.

Someone tell me I didn’t just hear that.

“So, that means…er—what does that mean?” he floundered. “Wig has it down as being about me, but…”

“So what’s this ‘power he knows not’? Any ideas?” Gideon asked.
Harry threw up his hands. “No none. Christ, I’ve no clue about any of it! It’s all so—so bleeding ridiculous!” *What the hell am I supposed to do with this?* “I dunno, maybe Wig was wrong or—”

“Wigol Palter isn’t one for being wrong,” Pel interrupted quietly. “Prophecies are riddles layered into other riddles that usually never make sense until after they’ve been fulfilled, if they’re ever fulfilled at all. But Wig’s a dab hand at solving them, so if he thinks it’s you, then I’d say it’s you, my friend.”

Harry shook his head. “This is just… I can’t believe Wig’s been an Unspeakable all this time! I did everything I could to stay away from them and I ended up practically living with one!”

“Wig wasn’t an Unspeakable.”

They all turned to stare at Pel.

“The Unspeakables in Dumbledore’s office said his place was part of their ministry so—”

The old barrister cut Gideon off. “Wig worked for them, that’s all. Has nearly all his life. An’ I’m guessing that explosion tells you how he felt about them.”

*Yeah. ‘Boom’ sends a pretty clear message.*

Harry suddenly remembered something else in Wig’s note. “Hey, he told me to thank you, Pel. Said that he’d never forgotten?”

*Thank me?”* The old man looked as though he’d been punched. *Or like he wants to punch something.* “Bloody damn fool,” Pel growled. “So bleeding stupid—”

“Mr. Pepst?” Lily prodded gently.

Harry fumbled for something to say as his friend seemed to sag into himself.

“Guess it doesn’t matter now…and with Wig gone I can actually talk about it…” Pel said softly. He looked up at the three of them, his gray eyes too bright. “You know I got drummed out of practicing law back when I worked for the Unspeakables? Well, it was because of Wig.”

Harry sat down silently next to him.

“They found him when he was just a kid, see? Ruddy OWL exams.”

“I don’t—” Lily started.

“The Divination OWLs, missy,” Pel barked with sudden fervor. “Part of them is a test to find kids with real skills in divining. Prophets, Seers, that sort of thing. Then the Unspeakables wait for the kid to hit their majority an’ offer them employment contracts. Of course, the purebloods know never to sign anything with an Unspeakable but Wig…Wig was a Muggleborn, an’ a poor one at that. Didn’t even realise he’d signed his life an’ his freedom away until it was too late. From the day he signed, they owned him.”

*Oh Wig.*

Harry closed his eyes to the sound of Lily’s gasp.

“Seers can’t See everything, of course.” Pel’s laugh crackled like dried twigs. “And poor Wig was still young. Untrained. He definitely didn’t See that one coming.”

“What’s this have to do with you?” Gideon asked, intent on the old man.
Pel’s hands balled into fists. “Wig fucked himself over long before we met. By the time I was involved he’d been the DoM’s pet Seer for decades. But then in the ‘40s he thought he’d found a way out of their control, a loophole in that stupid contract.” The man’s smile cracked with bitterness. “And he had. The terms meant that he couldn’t just waltz out, free as you like though, oh no. He could only renegotiate his contract.”

Harry had a sinking feeling in his stomach. “He had to renegotiate with the lawyer representing the Unspeakables, didn’t he? With you.”

Pel didn’t say anything for so long that Harry wondered if that man had even heard him. Finally, “Aye. With me. I—uh—I wasn’t a good man, Harry. I helped the Unspeakables get away with a lot of things that…well, that would definitely earn them their name. But by then I was just so damn tired of being the bad guy, see? An’ then there was the bloke who’d never even had a chance…”

“You threw the negotiations,” Lily interrupted in sudden comprehension.

“And that’s why they fired you,” Gideon concluded.

Pel nodded slowly. “I couldn’t set him free, my own contract had limitations as well. But I managed what I could…He had to stay on DoM property, but no one from the Department was using that part of Nonsuch, so I got it for him. Better than living in that tiny room in the damned Ministry itself. An’ I changed the terms of his job enough that he could spend his days investigating all the old prophecies the DoM keeps. He just had to try an’ figure out if they’d come true or not, an’ in what way. Stopped them from using him to try to control the future, at least.” Pel sighed. “I couldn’t do anything about the Curse though. Thank me?” He shook his head sadly. “Poor dumb bastard.”

“What do you—”

“Oh come on, Harry, you can hardly miss it! Can’t understand a bleeding word he says! That’s the Pythia’s Curse—Unspeakables don’t want others to use their Seers, so they cast it on them. Makes it so that only they can understand what their Seer is saying. Wig could have screamed the future at the top of his lungs in the Head, and you wouldn’t have caught a word of it.”

Holy shit.

“But his handwriting—I could read his note and—”

“That was me. Got him the ability to write intelligibly as long as it had nothing to do with the future of our world. If he did, if he disclosed anything like that to anyone or acted to change a future he’d Seen, then he’d break his contract and incur…penalties.”

“Oh hell,” Gideon sighed.

What am I missing?

Gideon’s hand clasped his as though giving comfort. “Harry, that’s exactly what he did when he took Rhys, and when he wrote the note to you,” his boyfriend said softly. “This contract of his—it was something like an Unbreakable Vow, wasn’t it?”

Pel’s slow nod hit Harry like a curse to the face.

“He died because of what he did for us, didn’t he?”

The old man met Harry’s gaze. “Yeah. Yeah he did. Most of the time, Seers can’t really change anything no matter what they do. But I guess ol’ Wig saw the chance to do something, an’, well,”
Pel bit his lip, “an’ he did.”

“I should like to be useful for once.”

Merlin.

Gideon was wiping his eyes, but Lily scowled at Pel.

“You didn’t want Harry to tell Gideon and me his real identity because you were afraid of the Unspeakables,” she said slowly, “so why the hell didn’t you warn him about Wig?”

Pel glared back. “First, I knew Wig wouldn’t tell—he’d hardly sign someone else up for a life like his! But,” he continued, deflating, “I couldn’t have told Harry anyway. Or Ab. My contract with the DoM had a non-disclosure, non-interference agreement.”

“What does that—” Harry started.

“When I quit, it kept me from talking about any details of ongoing projects an’ interacting beyond prescribed limits with DoM personnel. I haven’t spoken to or about Wigol Palter since the day we signed his new contract. Only reason I can do it now is…well, his ‘project’ isn’t ongoing anymore.”

With a start, Harry realised that he couldn’t remember Pel ever actually having spoken directly to Wig.

*Christ, what else have I missed in my own pub?*

The room descended into silence as they considered the sad lot of Wigol Palter.

After a bit, Lily spoke up. “Harry, I know there’s still a lot to talk about, but, um…Guin and Doc…they passed while you were getting Rhys. They’re in the Hospital Wing, but as far as we can tell Doc doesn’t have any living family and Guin’s sister lives in Germany, so—”

Rhys gurgled.

“Yeah…yeah,” he breathed, unsure of what he was even saying.

Before, he’d had the thought of rescuing Rhys, of *doing something*, to keep his mind from the Dearborns’ empty eyes. But now…

He barely noticed the other three exchanging glances.

“Doc’s family’s buried here in Hogsmeade,” Gideon said slowly, “I can make arrangements for the —their funerals.”

“An’ I’ll write to Guin’s sister, see if she wants to take the boy—” Pel started.

A sudden memory of Petunia, all sharp edges and scorn, sliced through the haze in Harry’s mind.

“I’m his godfather.” The steel in his voice surprised him as much as the words he found himself saying. “Rhys stays with me. If this sister I’ve never heard of, who’s certainly never visited, wants him,” he glared around the room, “well, we’ll certainly be *having words* about it.”

Mute nods and furtive glances were his only response.

No one said much of anything for a while. Lily refilled their tea and eventually got into a quiet conversation with Pel. Gideon sat next to him, a comforting weight and warmth.
They’re gone.

It didn’t seem real.

The hurt would come, come with claws out and sharpened teeth. But now, in his numbness before the pain, he could see the truth of what had happened.

“The Dementors…” Harry whispered, “they fucking stole them from us.”

Oh God.

Gideon stiffened oddly next to him, and even with his eyes closed Harry could feel the stares of Lily and Pel.

“What?” Pel asked with a strange sharpness.

“Oh—” Gideon breathed.

“Wait—” Lily exclaimed.

Harry opened his eyes and looked at his friends. All three were open-mouthed and wide-eyed.

“What?” he frowned. “What did I say?”

“Harry, they were Kissed by Dementors!” Lily’s smile struck him as an obscene, perverted thing.

“Yeah, no shit, Lily, thanks for—”

“Don’t you see, lad?” Pel interrupted, gesturing madly at him. “It’s not like we don’t know what happens when a person is Kissed!”

Oh. Harry sighed. “Yeah. I’ve thought of that.” It had hit him during the endless night in Dumbledore’s office, and for a few exhilarated moments he’d been deliriously happy.

But.

“But it doesn’t really matter, does it?” he asked quietly. “Not for us.”

xoxoxox

28 February, 1980

Doc and Guin Dearborn were buried in Hogsmeade on a grey Thursday morning shrouded in sheets of icy rain.

People spoke. Harry’s mind wasn’t on their words any more than it was on his own when he stood to offer a eulogy.

When he sat back down, Gideon assured him that he’d done just fine.

They didn’t…they just didn’t feel dead to him. Not when they could have ended up like me. Somewhere new, some when new.

Please let them be okay.

Please let them be together.
He glanced at Loch next to him. The young werewolf had taken a beating, but was mostly healed save for some bruises.

Although his expression was blank, Harry didn’t miss the whiteness of the man’s knuckles.

_It doesn’t really matter that they’re probably alive out there, somewhere._

_We’ve still lost them._

He idly wondered who had found his own body on Privet Drive.

Where they had buried it.

Harry was trying not to wonder how Ron and Hermione had handled the news when a touch from Gideon signalled the services had ended. Standing, he automatically went to grab Rhys’ baby bag, only to remember that he’d left the boy with Lily at Hogwarts.

_“He’ll get sick in this weather,”_ Gideon had said, _“and he won’t remember the funeral anyway.”_

Harry sighed, the thought that Rhys won’t remember his parents either rattling restlessly through his mind.

xoxoxox

The baby only fussed for a moment when he was lain in his new cot before drifting back to sleep. Harry was a bit envious.

Staring blankly around the unfamiliar room, he was too sick of _everything_ to think any more about the Dearborns, about Dementors, about the Head.

_“Seems nice enough,”_ Gideon observed. _“You can see the quidditch pitch from that window.”_

It was nice enough, he supposed. Harry was grateful that Albus had let him stay in Hogwarts as his ‘research assistant’ until the Head was repaired.

_Whenever the hell that’s going to be._

_It’s nice here._

He sighed.

_But it’s not home._

_“You two can stay with Fabe and me,”_ Gideon said again. _“We’re not really baby people, but—”_

_“No, here will be easier. Lots of people to help watch Rhys and all.”_

Indeed, Lily, Hagrid, and, to his shock, Professor Flitwick had all offered. And given how fond Poppy was of the baby, he’d probably have to fight to get her to stop holding Rhys.

So far he hadn’t heard a word from Guin’s sister in Germany. When Albus had haltingly told him that Brangaine Eufron had married a man whose family was deeply sympathetic to the cause of blood purity, he’d decided that she’d have a fight on her hands if she tried to assert any claim over his godson.

_Some aunt will take Rhys over my dead body._
With a shake of his head he wrenched himself away from that line of thinking. “Anyway here’s more convenient. There’s things to do.”

A lot of things. Now that he had no job and lived at the castle, he was going to do what he should have done since last summer. He was going to drown himself in books and research until he or, more likely, Albus figured out what the hell Voldemort had done.

No more half-arsing this.

And then he was going to figure out how to fight it.

Somehow.

But it’s all just so…so big, and I’m not Hermione or Albus, I can’t do this—

His thoughts spiraled. Panic flared, sharp and too-hot, and for a moment he felt buried alive all over again but—

But then Gideon slowly spun him around, his eyes bright.

“I—I—”

“I know.” The man pulled him close and Harry couldn’t stop himself from clinging to the one familiar thing in the room.

“Hey,” Gideon murmured, breath ghosting over Harry’s neck, “you’re still alive…” Kisses traced Harry’s jaw. “…and I’m still alive.” Gid’s mouth was on his own, teasing his lips open with a clever tongue, only to break the kiss off as soon as it started. “And we have now, if nothing else.”

Harry’s skin felt too warm, his body too untouched, the sudden emptiness in his life and fear for all their futures just too damn much.

“Please,” he managed to choke out, “I need—"

And Gideon was kissing him again, hands tangling in hair, gasps like promises on lips.

At some point Harry noticed they’d made it into the bedroom, though all their clothes hadn’t joined them for the trip. But then skin brushed skin and the rest of the world didn’t matter.

For a little while, at least.

xoxoxox

1 March, 1980

“It’s not that bad,” Fabian said brightly.

Harry didn’t have to turn to know that Gideon was giving his brother a look.

Not that bad…

Granted, it really could have been worse. Most of the outer walls were still standing in some way or another, and the kitchens and stable had barely been touched.

Of course, the second storey was mostly gone and they had to use Bubblehead Charms but…
Harry started to run his hand along the wooden bar, only to draw it back with a hiss. Sores were already erupting on his palm.

“Dammit, Harry, Sirius told you not to touch anything,” Alice admonished. She fished a bottle of dittany out of her bag. “That Black Fire—”

“I know, I know. It infects everything it burns.”

*Who the hell am I kidding?*

He couldn’t look at his friends, couldn’t drag his eyes away from the blackened skeleton that had been home.

*This is totally ‘that bad’.*

He sifted through a pile of ashen rubble with the toe of his boot. One of tusks from the boar’s head they’d always kept mounted on a wall glared back at him, its ivory rotted a sickly greyish-black.

“You’re going to rebuild it though, right?” Pel softly asked.

“Yeah,” Dalcop said, his voice stronger than Harry had ever heard it since the man’s wife had died in the Ministry Invasion, “Rosmerta’s bein’ good to us regulars and all, but the ‘Sticks ain’t…well, it’ ain’t here.”

“Of course I am!” Harry snapped, finally turning to his friends. Their eyes went wide at his tone. *Dammit. Not their fault.* “Of course I am,” he repeated more gently. “Just…not yet.”

“Why—”

“Oh Harry, you—”

“I said *not yet,*” he ground out. “I’m not going to rebuild just so Voldemort can target us again.”

“So when?” Gideon asked.

Harry stared at the bar, its blistered remains almost pulsing with whatever poison the Black Fire had spread.

His first morning living at Hogwarts had been divided between attempting to parent and yet another skull session with Albus. *There’s so much to do, and there’s just no time.*

From the middle of the room he slowly took a long look at his pub. *I don’t have time for you,* he told it quietly. *Not now. Not yet. But I will again one day,* he promised.

“When?” He eyed each of his friends in turn. “I’ll raise the Head again when Voldemort is *fucking dead,* that’s when. I mean honestly, it’s really about time someone got on that, don’t you think?”

Chapter End Notes
A Historical Note on the Nonsuch House: Not to be confused with Henry VIII’s Nonsuch Palace, in reality the Nonsuch House is the oldest known prefabricated building, assembled on Old London Bridge in the sixteenth century. Its whimsical name allegedly comes from the idea that there is “none such” other building. I thought it amusing to explain its revolutionary pre-fabrication as a “Muggle-Worthy” excuse for how magicals constructed it so quickly. It was built in 1578, so long before the Ministry (founded 1707), but I like to think of it as the earlier home of the Wizards’ Council, particularly because in real life the identity of the original owners and tenants remains a mystery. The sundial—there were actually two—and adage are preserved in original descriptions (and I figure given Gideon’s interest in clocks, he’d know about the sundials).

An Annoyingly-Long Author’s Note About Update Schedule: My apologies for how long it took to post this chapter. Continued health problems reared their hydraic heads and I somehow lost September in a haze of meds and exhaustion. Moreover, the pacing, content, and length of chapters 39 and 40 were seriously messed up. To fix them, I had to adapt this chapter and am having to add an extra, new chapter after this one. The good news is that I know what needs to be done. The bad news is I haven’t done it yet. It’ll be a while, but it is coming.


My beta AverageFish is entirely wonderful and also writes their own excellent fanfiction. They have two fics here on ao3 now. Check out the twilight parody and this wholesome Severitus or head over to their account on fanfiction.net for more.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!